JUNE

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Magazine

15¢

THE STRANGER WHO BORROWED BOOTHILL SMASH BOOK-LENGTH TRAIL TOWN NOVEL

By RAYMOND W. PORTER

GUN WOLVES OF THUNDER MESA

DRAMATIC NOVELET BY ED EARL REPP • Also THRILLING SHORT STORIES

FREE OFFER for USERS of FALSE TEETH

JIM WON'T EAT OUT BECAUSE HE LOSES HIS FALSE TEETH
BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
RUTH SAYS BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
I'LL ASK HIM FOR HIS SECRET
BOB, HOW DO YOU KEEP YOUR PLATE FROM SLIPPING?
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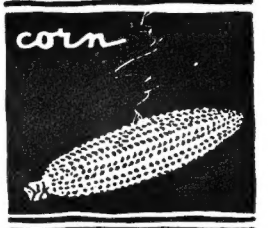

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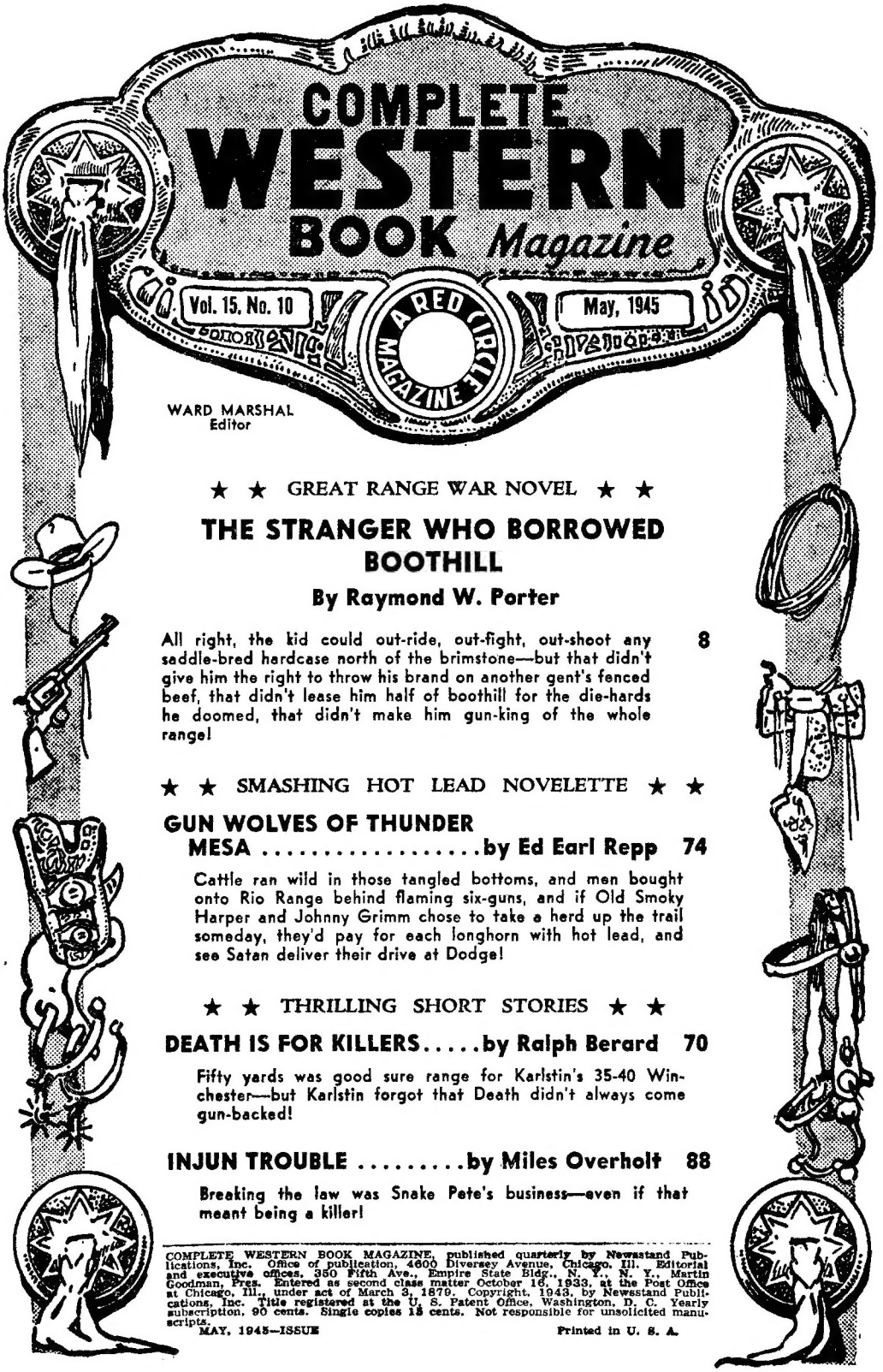

★ ★ GREAT RANGE WAR NOVEL ★ ★

THE STRANGER WHO BORROWED BOOTHILL

By Raymond W. Porter

All right, the kid could out-ride, out-fight, out-shoot any saddle-bred hardcase north of the brimstone—but that didn't give him the right to throw his brand on another gent's fenced beef, that didn't lease him half of boothill for the die-hards he doomed, that didn't make him gun-king of the whole range! **8**

★ ★ SMASHING HOT LEAD NOVELETTE ★ ★

GUN WOLVES OF THUNDER MESA .....by Ed Earl Repp 74

Cattle ran wild in those tangled bottoms, and men bought onto Rio Range behind flaming six-guns, and if Old Smoky Harper and Johnny Grimm chose to take a herd up the trail someday, they'd pay for each longhorn with hot lead, and see Satan deliver their drive at Dodge!

★ ★ THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

DEATH IS FOR KILLERS.....by Ralph Berard 70

Fifty yards was good sure range for Karlstin's 35-40 Winchester—but Karlstin forgot that Death didn't always come gun-backed!

INJUN TROUBLE .....by Miles Overholt 88

Breaking the law was Snake Pete's business—even if that meant being a killer!

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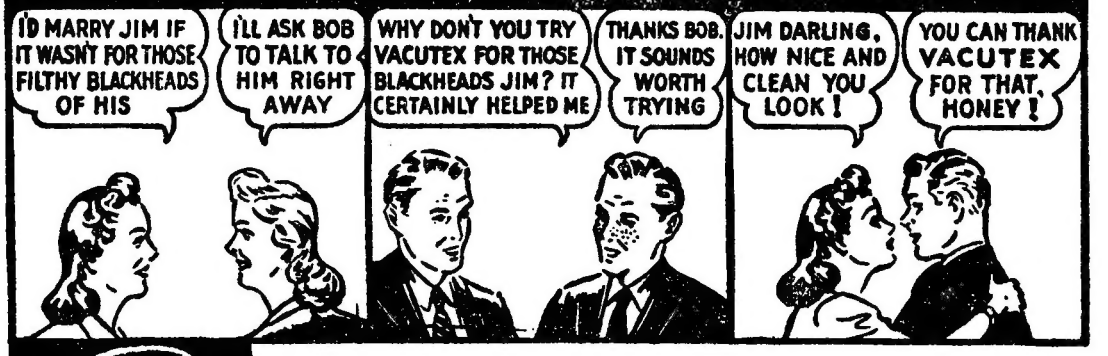
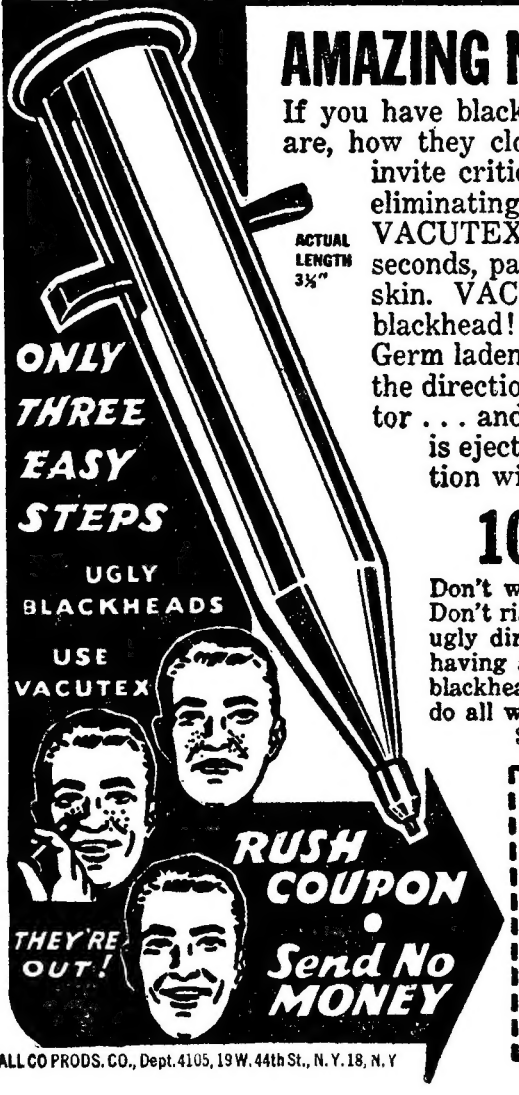
MAY, 1945—ISSUE

Printed in U. S. A.

REMOVE UGLY BLACKHEADS
OR NO COST


I'D MARRY JIM IF IT WASN'T FOR THOSE FILTHY BLACKHEADS OF HIS
I'LL ASK BOB TO TALK TO HIM RIGHT AWAY
WHY DON'T YOU TRY VACUTEX FOR THOSE BLACKHEADS JIM? IT CERTAINLY HELPED ME
THANKS BOB. IT SOUNDS WORTH TRYING
JIM DARLING, HOW NICE AND CLEAN YOU LOOK!
YOU CAN THANK VACUTEX FOR THAT, HONEY!



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The Stranger Who

HUB opened one eye just enough to see that day was breaking, and then he burrowed a little deeper into his blankets. He would take another wink while Peppermint went after the horses.

He heard Peppermint stir and yawn and light a cigarette. The smoke drifted pleasantly past his nostrils, but only increased his drowsiness. He was going off to sleep again when Peppermint growled at him and strode away.

Hub had slept but little that night, having trapped three bands of wild horses. He had to get up now and get breakfast. Then he had to go to work. Real work today. Roping, and tying, branding, cutting, and riding . . .

Borrowed Boothill

By RAYMOND W. PORTER

Nobody could stop the guns now—not even a courageous cowgirl and a reckless kid!

Too much gold and too much gun—that was what they said would be the kid's doom. For the kid's trouble was, he figured because he could out-ride, out-fight, and out-shoot every hardcase north of the border, that made him undisputed Colt-king of the whole range!

He awoke guiltily, staring up at the bright clear sky. It was broad daylight now and Peppermint would be coming back any minute, madder than Hades because breakfast wasn't ready.

Hub started to throw back his blan-

kets, but his eyes dropped first from their skyward gaze. This kept him from dying, at that instant.

He was looking into a pair of beaded motionless eyes, that were staring at him with blood-curdling intentness. They were about ten or twelve inches from his face. They were divided by a wedge-shaped head, from the point of which flashed a forked tongue like streaks of black lightning. Beyond that flat and ugly head, there was only the blue sky. Out of the clear morning sky again came the black lightning.

THE slightest move would bring it crashing into Hub. Yet it was not so much the certainty of this that kept him motionless. He probably could not have moved at that moment had he wanted to. He was filled with a sickly fear which completely enervated him.

Rattlesnakes were nothing new in Hub's life. He had been born and raised with them, so to speak. While he had a healthy respect for them he had never feared them especially. But this was the first time he had ever woke up with one upon his chest.

Anyway you looked at it, the thing was not an attractive bedmate. It looked as if it might have had a bad night too. There was a rigidity to its neck, a backward thrust to its head which gave every indication that it was ready to strike.

Hub dared not let even an eyelid flicker. He could not turn his eyes from the thing. He had to stare straight into its eyes and wait. Wait for death to strike.

He could only pray that it wouldn't —as long as he didn't move his lips. He could wait, he could hope, and he could pray. That was all.

There was a numbness throughout his body, as if the venom was already in his blood, doing its deadly work. There was feeling only in his eyes. They burned and ached from the effects of the hypnotic stare in which they were locked.

Seconds passed, each one of them an hour to Hub. Minutes passed. These were days. Days without nights. Days of wide-eyed horror. The snake grew larger and larger. Now, its head seemed as big as a man's, but still wedge-shaped and utterly inhuman. It's eyes, though lidless and browless and motionless, seemed also to be as large as a man's. There was expression in them—a questioning, angry, piercing glance.

It evidently could not make up its mind about Hub. Was he alive? Was he an enemy? It had been attracted, of course, by the warmth of his body on this chilly morning. It liked this big flat warm spot it had found to coil upon, but it didn't like Hub's face.

True, it was not a handsome face, according to human standards. But a snake should have liked it. For it had the rugged cragginess of stone—a dark, weathered standstone—just the kind of place a snake likes to lie and sun itself. There was a nice long ridge of a nose, on which the snake could have scratched its belly. There was a big square butte of a chin, wide flat mesas for cheeks, and a long friendly furrow of a mouth. All of which should have pleased a snake.

After a long inspection—how long Hub could not guess within two weeks —the snake stretched its neck a little more and then turned its head to look around. Hub's heart began to pound so hard he was afraid it would arouse the snake's suspicions. Could he possibly knock it aside, now, before it could strike? Yes, if he could move as fast as lightning. That was the way a snake could strike. Hub knew.

It still seemed to be watching him from the corner of its eye. Questioning him. Daring him to bat an eyelash. Hub didn't.

A crescent of sun appeared, and a shaft of sunlight struck Hub in the eyes. He was facing the east, and now he was blinded until he could scarcely see his venomous visitor. This was some relief.

He wondered if he could hold out till Peppermint got back. And he wondered what would happen then. He could not call out to warn him, and Peppermint would come blundering up and scare the snake, no doubt, and set its fangs to flashing again.

THE snake swung back, gave him a long uncertain stare, then curled up a little more confidently. Thereafter it indulged in several side glances, taking in the situation in general. After each glance, it turned back to look for a few seconds at Hub, but it never moved enough to lose sight of him.

Hub thought he was going to be sick. His stomach rolled. He set his jaws, and thought he would have to swallow. His mouth was as dry as the dust that covered the brush fence of the corral near which he lay.

The wild horses trapped during the night went into a sudden stampede about the corral, and Hub watched the snake lift its head—up and up—as if it were trying to see over the fence.

Then came the sound Hub had been praying for, and yet fearing — the steady tramp of horses and then Peppermint's voice.

"What the hell's the matter down there? Ain't you started breakfast yet?"

The snake stiffened. Its tongue flashed.

"Hey! Ain't you up yet?"

He came stomping around the fence muttering . . . "God-dam lazy so-and-so. . . . Want me to drag you out of there and kick your ribs in? . . .

"Hey?"

He stopped abruptly, only a few steps away.

"Don't move!" This was probably the most unnecessary advice ever given.

The snake writhed, quivered, lifted the tip of its tail and rattled. Hub had heard that low, brittle, ominous sound hundreds of times, but never had it rung in his ears with this crashing impact.

The gun sounded only a little louder. It barked once, and the snake, headless, continued to writhe upon Hub's chest. He slapped the thing away and stumbled to his feet. He took in big gulps of air, fighting the sickness that threatened him. A blackness swam before his eyes, and he could not control his trembling legs. Then he was very sick. He thought he was going to die. He clung weakly to the corral fence.

It was the funniest thing Peppermint had seen in a long time. He whooped and hollered and pounded his brother on the back.

"Man, oh man!" chortled Peppermint. "Was you scared! Man, oh man! Did that rattler turn you wrong side out!"

Hub protested weakly. "Lemme alone!"

"You ought to stick your head in the water hole," Peppermint decided. "Come on, I'll help you."

He dragged Hub into the corral, through the filth and mud around the water hole, and shoved his head under the water. Hub got his lungs full and came up blinded and coughing.

Peppermint ducked him again.

Hub howled and cussed him and tried to fight back. But he was too sick. And he was too mad. When he got this mad he couldn't see very well. The muddy water in his eyes didn't help much.

He swore he would drown his tormentor. He swore he would beat him to death. Peppermint yelled in glee and ducked him again. This time Hub crawled out and lay in the mud, completely played out.

"Feel better now?" Peppermint

asked. "Haw, haw, haw! I'll fix you some breakfast. Coffee's what you need now."

Coffee was what he needed. But it scalded him, and he couldn't keep it down.

"You must have been out on a bender last night, wasn't you?" Peppermint jibed. "Well, I reckon it's my turn tonight. You ain't goin' to be worth a damn today. Can't do no work. Reckon I'll go to town."

He finished his breakfast leisurely, smoked a cigarette, and ate a stick of peppermint candy. He could afford to eat a whole stick, since he was going to town today.

HE SADDLED his horse, hobbled the others and turned them out. "So long, kid," he said. "Don't take no wooden nickels—and don't play with no rattlesnakes."

Peppermint was happy over this unexpected break in the grilling work of trapping and breaking wild horses. He and Hub had been at it for several days without a let-up. Hub was the kind who never wanted to stop, once he got started. Hub was a mule, a damned mule. He could outwork any ordinary human. He thought he could out-shoot, and out-ride, and out-do anybody.

Well, he couldn't do much now. It was sure funny to see Hub sick and played out. Peppermint would have liked to stay there and enjoy Hub's misery, but he was afraid Hub would recover and beat him up. Tomorrow he might try it, but tomorrow he wouldn't be so mad, and if Hub wasn't mad, Peppermint wasn't afraid of him.

It had been that way even when they were kids. Peppermint had learned just how far he could taunt his year-older brother, and just when he dared to fight him. When Hub got cock-eyed mad he was sure enough mean. But he didn't get that way very often, which was a very good thing for Peppermint.

Peppermint had been to Quailtown but once, and he was anxious to go back. He had met a girl there he wanted to see again, and he also wanted to lay in a new supply of peppermint candy.

He could get along without cigarettes, he could go without meat and potatoes and coffee, he could even survive a long time without water, as he had proved by one experience on the desert. But he could not get along without peppermint candy, and stay in a normal condition. He could substitute doses of sugar, or syrup, if necessary. He could eat anything sweet and generate the necessary amount of energy to keep him going. But he could not be satisfied without peppermint. If he had to go without it, there was a constant gnawing in the pit of his stomach, a very real and compelling hunger, regardless of what else or how much he ate and drank.

He had developed this passion as a kid, and realized it was a kid passion. But he had never got over it, and had never tried very hard. He had been known as Peppermint so long he no longer resented the nickname, and he had hardened himself against the jokes. But, underneath, he was sensitive about it, and he had had many a fight which stemmed from just such a joke.

Now, he was in a strange country, and he would be as careful as he could to keep his vice a secret. He knew where he could buy candy without attracting any attention—from the girl who ran the wagon-yard in Quailtown, with a little store in one corner of it.

HE DREW out a leather tobacco pouch filled with candy, flipped a half stick in his mouth, and crunched it placidly. He was well on his way to a first class peppermint jag, when he

came across the dead man.

His horse saw the body first, and stopped with a snort. Peppermint got off and walked to where it lay at a bend in the trail. Fresh tracks indicated that the man had fallen from a running horse.

Peppermint judged it an accident, till he straightened the body and saw the bullet hole in his chest. It must have been made by a forty-five at close range, and couldn't have happened many minutes ago, for the body was still warm. Yet Peppermint had heard no gun-shot.

The man was of middle age, mild-looking, half-bald, dressed in worn work clothes. He wore no gun and did not look like a man who would be in a gun fight. He was either the victim of an accident, or of a killer who had shot him unarmed.

The man who had killed him could not be far away. Peppermint studied the trail, which arose sharply for a short distance, then dropped down a long timbered slope. The assailant might be anywhere along that trail, he might be watching now from any of a dozen places of concealment.

These speculations gave Peppermint a creepy feeling, which was not lessened by the absolute quiet which prevailed—a silence through which a pistol shot would have carried many miles.

Peppermint felt through the pockets to see if he could find any identification. He pulled from the hip pocket of the worn overalls a blue bandana wrapped about a roll of money. He fingered through the bills in amazement—a hundred, two hundred, five hundred—

He looked up nervously, studied the green clumps of buckbrush and the dark red glow of the manzanita bushes around him—then went on counting. Eight, nine hundred, a thousand dollars!

It was enough to turn Peppermint's curiosity and his creepiness into a very lively personal interest. He had never seen the man before, and did not know who had shot him or why—nor was it any of his business. But this kind of money, lying around loose, might be anybody's business who came along.

Whose money was it? A dead man's. The dead man had no use for money. He couldn't spend it where he was going.

Still, the money would belong to his family—if he had any family. But suppose he didn't have? Then, Peppermint figured, he would have as much right to it as anybody.

Hastily he went through the rest of the pockets. There was nothing to identify the man. With hands that were beginning to tremble, Peppermint pocketed the money.

It would be foolish to leave all that money in a dead man's pocket. The next fellow who came along would take it. Peppermint felt that it was up to him to remove temptation from other passerby. He would take the money to town and try to find out whom it belonged to now.

He rode on, carefully watching the trail ahead and the timber on both sides. The killer would be out there somewhere. Why hadn't he taken the money? That obviously had not been his object.

The possession of a thousand dollars in greenbacks put a new excitement in Peppermint. He kept telling himself the money wasn't his, but he willing to give himself an argument about that. "It's just like findin' it in the road," he maintained. "It ain't like stealin' it. If nobody claims it, then it's mine!"

A voice froze him: "Hold it!'

This must have sounded like "Whoa!" to Peppermint's horse. It stopped without a touch on the reins.

A man stepped from the brush into

the trail behind Peppermint, holding a sixgun hip high—not aiming it, but conveying the same idea just as effectively.

"You meet anybody back yonder?" the stranger asked.

Peppermint hesitated, then, reasoning that you don't "meet" dead people, said, "No."

"You're a liar, said the other man.

PEPPERMINT turned in his saddle, stared hard at the stranger—a small ruddy man who was poised like a red fox at a chicken house.

"You callin' me a liar?" Peppermint asked, ominously.

"And a thief."

These were ugly, fighting words. They stung. But they didn't hurt as bad as forty-five slugs. Peppermint managed to control his temper.

"You took the money off'n Fogelsmith."

This was a square hit and enough of a surprise to put Peppermint's head to reeling. "What?" he stammered. "Who?"

"Get off that horse. On this side. Keep your hands up—unless you want to do some shootin'. If you do, go right ahead."

There was no hurry, Peppermint decided, about shooting. This red fox of a man was altogether too ready.

"Now walk toward me," the stranger ordered.

He knew exactly what to do. He knew too much. He knew the dead man back there, and had probably killed him.

"Turn around, and stand there," he said.

He took Peppermint's gun. Holding it and his own, he commanded, "Fork over the money, now."

Peppermint lowered his hands. "I just took it to keep somebody else from gettin' it," he explained.

This brought a sharp barking laugh from the fox-man. "You wouldn't be stallin', would you? Come on!"

Fumbling in his pockets, as if he had forgotten where he put the money gave Peppermint another second or two in which to judge the man and the possibility of getting between those two guns and slapping him down. He was small enough, Peppermint could have twisted him in two, but size had little to do with this.

Half turning, he held out the roll of bills. "Would you mind tellin' me what in hell this is all about?" he asked mildly. But watching, now, very closely.

The stranger dropped one gun, so he could take the money. He leaned a little forward, extended his hand. Peppermint laid the roll of bills carefully into the outstretched hand.

Then he shook hands with the little man. Not an ordinary handshake. Several times quicker than that—just as quick as a human hand could move. At the same time he jerked the stranger forward. Crossing with his left, he smashed at the red, stubble-bearded chin. The blow was good and solid. The head snapped back, while Peppermint was jerking him forward by the arm. This nearly disconnected the head from the body.

Seizing the gun, Peppermint chopped him down. The fight was gone out of him now, but Peppermint was just getting started. He kicked him around awhile, dragged him to his feet, knocked him down and kicked him some more.

There was no such thing as fighting "fair" or "unfair," according to Peppermint's standards. There were no rules. There was just one object to a fight, and that was to defeat your opponent. The more thoroughly you beat him, the better fighter you were.

Let anybody say who wanted to, that kicking a man when he's down is not

good sportsmanship. Let anybody stand back who wanted to and wait for his opponent to get up—or give him an even chance to go for his gun. There were damn fools in the world like that. Hub was one of them. And Hub sometimes got the hell beat out of him. Sometime Hub would get killed that way.

But not Peppermint. If he could catch his enemy off guard, that was the time to start the fight. If he could get the other man down, that was the time to stomp him in the face. A wild horse had sense enough to do that. Any animal in the world was smart enough to know that in a fight which means life or death, winning was all that mattered—winning and living.

When Peppermint got through with the little foxy man, there was no question as to who was the winner, and who would go on living. Peppermint would. But you couldn't tell about his victim. He was not dead; he was only beaten to a partly living pulp.

"Now, maybe you'll tell me what this is all about," Peppermint suggested sociably.

But the man could not talk. He couldn't move his battered lips enough.

"You said you seen me take this money off some dead man," Peppermint reminded him. "You're a liar, of course. And if you tell anybody that lie, well—I let you off easy this time."

HE GOT out a stick of candy and chewed it thoughtfully. After violent exertion, this seemed to restore his lost energy. "You must of shot that wha'd-you-call-'im? Didn't you?"

The man made sounds of denial and moved his head.

"I don't care. It's none of my business. But when you tried to rob me, that was my business."

His business seemed to be settled, so he moved away. "If I ever see you again, which you better hope I don't, I'll ask you some questions."

He rode on, feeling that he had established his ownership of the money, or at least a good part of it. He had fought for it, and saved it from falling into the hands of a hijacker. That entitled him to something, didn't it?

As he came to the foot of the long wooded slope, he emerged into a grassy flat, which extended into the blue of another range of distant hills. Quailtown was out there about five miles, nearly lost in the tall intervening grass. From this distance it looked like a covey of birds, ready to take to the air if you got too close.

Peppermint had that kind of notion about most towns. He was wary of them and approached them cautiously, because he had always lived in the hills. He knew the hills and felt safer there. He knew what to expect from a wild horse, or an animal of any kind that ran wild in the hills. But he never knew what to expect of other men. He didn't trust them, and he didn't understand them.

Yet he was often lonely and longed for companionship of other men—anybody besides Hub. He got so sick and tired of Hub he often wished he could go away and never see him again. The fact that Hub was his brother didn't help a bit. On the other hand, this seemed to be an added irritation.

He and Hub were not much alike, except in outward appearance and size. Peppermint saw no reason why they should stay together just because they were brothers, and he thought if he could find somebody else who could handle wild horses as well as Hub, he would be happy to change partners. But he couldn't find anybody like that. And he couldn't trap horses alone.

He had never considered doing anything else. Punching cows was too slow and paid too little and tied a man down too much. Working for wages

was like putting on harness and pulling a plow.

Living in town was completely beyond his conception. Usually one day was enough for him, and he had no intention of staying over-night in Quailtown—till he rode into the wagonyard.

"You want a room or you want to sleep out?" asked the girl who met him at the entrance.

"You got rooms?" he asked in surprise.

"Sure. Just the other side of the feed room. They used to be box stalls, but I fixed 'em up into rooms, and put beds in 'em. I rent 'em for two-bits a night. It's better than sleepin' on the ground."

It was a novel idea anyway, sleeping in a bed. Peppermint dismounted. "I'll do it!" he decided.

"Two-bits," said the girl. "And two-bits to feed your horse."

"Ain't that pretty high?" Peppermint grinned.

"Not for what you get, which is only the best. A bed to sleep on and corn and hay for your horse. I got a store, too. I can sell you any supplies you want."

"You got any more of that peppermint candy?"

"Sure—Oh, you were here once before!"

She seemed as glad to see him as if he were an old friend. He beamed, not resenting the fact that she remembered him on account of the peppermint candy. "I'm an old customer," he said.

She walked with him to the well, which was equipped with a windlass and wooden bucket.

"You didn't stay here. You just stopped and bought a dollar's worth of candy. Bet your kids were tickled."

He couldn't decide if she were serious. She laughed all the time with her eyes. She had a turned-up nose, and was a little bit of a thing, but she wasn't a kid. She was fully grown and she showed it in every move, and curve, and smile. She didn't flirt exactly—at least not the way other girls did. She just seemed happy about something, and he began to hope he was that something.

PEPPERMINT got along with girls better than men—a fact which disturbed him not at all. Nobody could accuse him of being effeminate. Girls seemed to like him, and he liked girls. That's all there was to it.

"How many you got?" she asked.

"How many what?"

"Kids."

He chuckled. "Oh, I got a lot of 'em. Don't know just how many."

"My! Haven't you ever counted 'em?"

"Not lately. They just run wild in the hills. I've got a bunch of traps, and I trap 'em when I can. That's what I wanted with the candy."

She laughed heartily, then hiccoughed. "Excuse me," she said, touching her lips with her fingers. "Every time I laugh too hard I—hic—hiccough." And she laughed again. "I'll bet you haven't got any kids at all. I'll bet you bought that candy to give to the girls."

He drew a bucket of water and poured it into the wooden trough. "Yeh, I've got a lot of girls too."

"I'll bet you have." This was said with frank admiration. Peppermint was feeling higher all the time: It was somewhat like finding another thousand dollars in the road, and knowing you could keep it.

Peppermint had to show off a little bit. He took the roll of money from his pocket, thumbed through it carelessly and selected a ten-dollar bill. "Where do I put my nag?" he said.

Her eyes were wide and reverent and she took the ten-dollar bill gingerly. "Haven't you got anything smaller? I

don't keep much money on hand."

"Let me see." After a search he found a five.

"You can put your horse in any of them salls," she said. "I'll get the corn and you can throw him some hay from that stack. But I'll get your change first—it makes me nervous holdin' money. Always afraid I'll lose it."

"Never mind about the change," Peppermint said with a gesture of indifference. "I'll like as not spend it all right here."

She tucked the bill carefully in the pocket of her blouse, gave it a satisfied pat, then went to the feed room and got an armful of shucked corn.

"My horse ain't used to corn," Peppermint said. "That'll founder him."

For some reason, she found that very funny. She laughed, and he laughed. She hiccoughed. "Sorry!" she apologized. "Don't make me laugh so much."

"I ain't makin' you laugh," he said. And they laughed again.

They walked back to the store building, in the corner of the lot at the entrance gate.

"Now, what'll you have?" she asked, walking behind the counter, which was waist-high, but piled with boxes and stacks of jumpers and overalls and bolts of yard goods, so that she could barely see over it.

"Well, I'll take about four dollars' worth of this here peppermint candy," he said, peering at a glass case.

"Four dollars! Why, I haven't got that much!"

"Then give me all you got."

The magnitude of this transaction nearly broke up her business. She thought he was crazy, and she didn't have anything to put it in. He suggested two empty lard buckets, and said he could tie them on his saddle and keep it in camp without the ants getting in it.

"Who's goin' to eat all of this candy?" she wanted to know.

"I am," he said, a bit defensively.

"You! Why I never heard of such a thing! A *man*—like *you!* Eatin' stick candy! Four dollars' worth! Oh my gosh!"

"Don't laugh," he warned. "You know what happens when you laugh."

She gave him a wonderful smile, instead. "Why you're just like a kid, actually. Eating candy, and — and everything."

For some miraculous reason, even this didn't make him mad. "You're a lot like a kid, yourself," he declared.

"Am I?" Her eyes were wide again, clear and sky-blue, willing to accept his every word as gospel.

Suddenly, she shook her head as if coming out of a trance. "Well!" she said, quite business-like. "What else?"

He leaned over the counter, caught her by the shoulders. "I'll take some of this," he said, and kissed her with a business-like smack.

SHE looked as though it was the first time she'd ever been kissed. But it couldn't have been. She was too kissable. She didn't move for a time, except to moisten her lips. She seemed to be tasting the kiss.

"How—how much do you want?" she asked.

He gripped her tightly, and wished the counter wasn't between them, but he didn't want to wait to get around to where she was. "All you've got!" he said.

Before he could kiss her again, there was a thumping of feet at the door. The Devil came in. Of course, it was a devil of a time for anybody to come in; but this was the Devil in person.

Peppermint had seen pictures of him, and had always thought he had a tail and horns. But he didn't have. He was human in form and wore clothes. Not the clothes of an average man, however. His big black hat was

bigger and blacker than any other hat. Instead of ten, it was of fifteen gallon capacity, and it had a shine to it, a sort of silken sheen. His broadcloth coat was longer and blacker than any other coat. It was several yards of an austere dignity beyond this world. His boots shone like black polished metal. He hadn't walked through dust to get here, He had simply risen up from the underworld blackness.

When he spoke, the spell was broken somewhat. These were no sepulchral tones, emanating from the regions of the dead. They were flat and direct. "This the man?"

It was not till then that Peppermint noticed another man had entered the room. Sight of him gave Peppermint even more of a jolt. It was the little red fox of a man. The raw bruises on his face had blackened, otherwise he looked about the same. Fantastically, it seemed to Peppermint that this man must have died, and the Devil had brought him back to earth.

"Yeah! That's him!" said the foxy man, but not so foxy now.

The Devil fixed Peppermint with a scornful stare. "You robbed a dead man of a thousand dollars?" he said, as if it were a dead too low even for his approval.

This blunt accusation gave Peppermint no chance to explain his act: he had either to admit his guilt or deny it. If he admitted it he was doomed to hell —and worse, since the girl was a spellbound witness. He regretted flashing the money in front of her more than taking it in the first place. To save face with her, he would have to swear the money was his.

"Don't know who you are, stranger, or what you're talkin' about," he said slowly.

The girl was immediately defiant. "What do you mean, Mr. Cutter?"

"I seen him take the money off'n Jim Fogelsmith!" the little man broke in. "I seen him!"

"Fogelsmith!" exclaimed the girl, as if she were beginning to understand it, but could not quite believe it. "Fogelsmith had a thousand dollars?"

"And this buckaroo robbed him!" reiterated the little man. "Snatched the thousand dollars!"

"And you shot Jim Fogelsmith, Mr. Cutter!" said the girl, as if it were all quite clear to her now.

Peppermint, too, was beginning to get the drift. This Cutter, alias The Devil, had shot the man Peppermint found lying in the road. Both Cutter and this little red-headed snipe knew the dead man had a thousand dollars on him.

But why hadn't they taken it, if that was what they were after?

"Don't sully your sweet young mind with any bad thoughts, Janie," said Cutter, smiling at her and showing teeth like those of an old mustang, worn off unevenly. Teeth like that could chew up hay and corn, and break a young stallion's neck. "I shot Jim Fogelsmith when he tried to shoot me, after I caught him looting Doc's office."

"I know that's what you said," Janie retorted, "but I don't believe it!"

"It makes no difference to me what you believe," Cutter said. "So long as you don't let your beliefs lead you astray. Just why are you talking so much? Is this a friend of yours—this corpse-robber?"

"That's what *you* are!" cried Janie. "Just exactly what you are! No—you're worse than that. You killed Jim Fogelsmith because you thought he had some money. And you didn't get it. And now you're accusin' my friend—"

"Maybe I better handle this," said Peppermint, pleased over just one thing so far: She had called him "My friend."

HE STEPPED back away from the counter, a little nearer Cutter, but keeping both Cutter and the little man lined up as they began to spread out. It looked as though they were going to make a gun-fight out of it, and Peppermint never waited for any man to draw a gun on him. It was so much better to draw first, if you had any idea that it would be necessary.

"Look here!" cried Janie.

Both Cutter and the little red man looked, but Peppermint didn't. Along with his Number One safety rule of always shooting first, was another one—never to let his attention be drawn away from any possible opponent.

"You can't do this!" Janie said. "It's c-cold-blooded—"

Peppermint shot the little man first, and then turned his gun on Cutter. It should have been easy. Neither of them had yet drawn his gun, and the attention of both had been momentarily drawn to Janie.

But something went wrong. Peppermint was a little too hasty. His first shot was not good enough. It didn't knock the little man down, but only spun him around.

And now he was coming right at Peppermint, as if he had been wound up like a top and spun across the room. He was snatching at his gun as he came, leaping and yelling.

THIS threw Peppermint off on his second shot. He missed Cutter completely. He met the little man's rush with a blast that did not stop him. Peppermint tried to get away and stumbled smack into Cutter.

He ducked a blazing gun which was so close the flame of it was like a match swiftly brought to his face to light a cigarette at night. He could see nothing but its sudden flare, and when it went out he was in darkness. He was stunned and he thought he was falling. Nothing was very clear after that. There was more shooting, things were falling on him, people were running. The place seemed to be full of people, but as he tried to identify them, they all looked alike: Tall black figures with enormous white teeth, floating through the air in every conceivable position, standing on their heads, lying on their backs, tied into knots. One of them was rolled into a ball, like a big black cannonball, and it was coming toward him and he couldn't get out of the way. It bounced off the top of his head and made a noise like a tin cup falling on the floor . . .

Janie was bobbing up and down behind the counter. Each time a gun went off, she went down—then came up again to shout defiance and give unheeded commands.

"Stop it, I say! Stop it! . . . Climax! Mr. Cutter! . . . You'll kill him! . . ."

That was obviously Mr. Cutter's idea, and it was not likely that he would be dissuaded by anything Janie might say. She decided she would have to *do* something about it.

Janie had always felt personally responsible for the comfort and safety of all her customers. And for this one she felt more personal interest than usual, since her customers did not usually kiss her. She was still warm and fluttery from that kiss, even while waves of distress passed through her as she watched the fight.

This new customer of hers, whose name she did not know, whose face she had seen but once before, had suddenly become very important to her, very close, very familiar. This was partly on account of the kiss, and partly on account of the fight. Janie had been kissed before, but she had never been affected this way—turning hot and cold, and weak and wild. But never before had a kiss of hers turned into a killing.

Nor would it now if she could stop

it! She picked up the first suitable object she could find. It happened to be a hame from a small stock of harness goods which she carried in the store.

Cutter was entirely occupied and paid no attention to her as she ran up behind him. She hit him across the back of the head. He wavered, with his gun in the air, and seemed to be trying to turn around. She took both hands to the hame and hit him again. He fell on his face, and he managed to do it with dignity—just as you would expect him to do.

Janie, looking at that tall, splendid, broadclothed figure stretched motionless on the floor, was appalled with what she had done. There lay Sutherland Cutter, the most fearful man in all of Janie's world. Sutherland Cutter, whose very name put a chill in her—and in hundreds of others. Sutherland Cutter, whose bussiness was Death, whose presence was always like a cloud, a long black cloud forecasting a coming storm. Sutherland Cutter, who admitted a fondness for dead people and a contempt for the living.

SHE had whacked Sutherland Cutter over the head with a harness hame! She had knocked him senseless!

Janie felt herself suddenly endowed with superhuman strength and courage. She fancied the hame a magic sword and herself a cross between a Stagger Hills Amazon and a Quailtown Joan of Arc. She whirled about to face the rest of her enemies, and found that she was the only remaining survivor of the battle.

The three men were piled on the floor—whether dead, dying, or just unconscious she did not know. She was the victor. She, alone!

If she took momentary credit for downing all three men in her first flush of victory, she did not long permit herself this delusion. Her feeling of triumph was short-lived. Astonishment and fear again clutched at her, and pulled her down—right down on her knees. She knelt beside the man she had so valorously defended.

Was he dead? Where was he hit? With all that shooting, he was probably riddled—

He was bruised about the face, but not wounded. There was no blood gushing from his body, no wounds anywhere that she could see. She placed her hand on his heart, and found a reassuring throb. His shirt was torn and one leg of his pants ripped away, and there was a crimson line extending across his thigh, where a bullet had gone.

Who was he? Had he stolen a thousand dollars? He had a lot of money. She had seen it. She knew which pocket it was in.

Janie felt in that pocket. Yes, the money was there. Should she take it, and keep it for him? If they found the money on him, and somebody had robbed the body of Jim Fogelsmith, they would think he had done it sure—whether he had or not. She couldn't think he had. He was certainly not a "corpse-robber" like Cutter had said.

She took the roll of money, thrust it into her waist front, and ran out of the store calling her hired man, forgetting the guns had made lots more noise than she could. "Ernest! Ernest!"

Ernest was hobbling across the lot on his wooden leg almost as fast as a two-legged man could run. "What's it, Janie? What's the shootin'?"

"Go get the sheriff!" she cried. "I'll stay here and—bat him down again if he comes to!"

"Who?"

"Mr. Cutter! I knocked him out!"

"You—Cutter? Lord! You didn't!"

"Yes, I did. I hit him on the head—with this." She brandished the curved piece of wood and steel. "Get the

sheriff—run!"

Ernest ran, taking long, hopping, uneven strides down the path to town, and Janie turned back to the store. It took a lot of courage to go back in there, more courage than she had just then.

She turned, calling—"Hurry, Ernest —" And then she saw Pastor Pete coming. Pastor Pete must have heard the shooting too, for he had his old black mare in a run. He swung from his saddle in a whirl of dust.

Next to the sheriff, there was nobody Janie would rather have seen just then than Pastor Pete. For a good many years she had been telling Pastor Pete all of her troubles and all of her joys. It made her joys twice as big and her troubles twice as little.

For Pastor Pete was one of those rare people who actually shared everybody else's joys and troubles. Very often he took on himself more of the troubles than he left for the owner to carry. Like when Janie's father died, four years ago.

Pastor Pete had carried that one almost by himself. Janie had thought she couldn't carry any of it. She didn't see how she could go on, by herself, and do what she had done. Had anybody heard tell of a fifteen year-old girl running a wagon-yard? Putting in a store? Not only making a lot of money, but making a lot of friends? Learning that she was not alone in the world, but was living with a world full of good, wonderful, lovable people? That's what she had done, with the help of Pastor Pete.

For a preacher, Pastor Pete did an awful little bit of preaching, and an awful lot of helping. He gave very little advice, and did little unnecessary talking.

Right now he didn't ask her questions, but went on into the store and saw what had happened. He examined all three men and expressed his surprise that none of them seemed to be fatally shot. "God's will be done!" he said, resignedly, but as though he did not wholeheartedly applaud the Almighty's decision in the matter.

WHEN Janie told him what had happened, he looked down at Cutter and said, "I know of only one man's funeral I'd like to preach, Janie."

"I hit him as hard as I could," Janie said.

Pastor Pete chuckled. "You did all right, Janie."

"Do you think I did?" she asked anxiously. "I mean — about the money?"

He nodded. "Yes, I think you did. If this young man stole the money—"

"Oh, I don't think he did!"

"Then why did you take it?"

"Because they would accuse him, if they found it on him. Don't you see?"

He looked at her closely. "Yes, I see."

When Pastor Pete looked at her that way, she knew he was looking into her heart. There was something new in Janie's heart, and she didn't care if he did see it. "He kissed me, Pastor Pete."

This seemed to give him a bit of a shock, and Pastor Pete was hard to shock. "I didn't know that you knew him."

"I don't."

He grinned. "Well! Isn't this a little sudden?"

"Everything happened so sudden. He was kissing me, and in walked Mr. Cutter and Climax, and they started fighting. I don't know yet whether I—like him or not. I think I do. Anyway, I don't want to see him accused of something he didn't do."

"And you're convinced he didn't rob Jim Fogelsmith?"

"Of course he didn't!" But Janie was not so sure. She was afraid he had, and she could no more conceal this fear from

Pastor Pete than she could hide her other thoughts from him.

"Janie," he said, worriedly, "you don't know this man. I hope he's as good as you think he is—"

"I don't know how good he is! But I know he's not—bad."

"There's good in the worst of us, and bad in the best of us—don't forget it."

"I won't. And I wouldn't want him to be too good. He wouldn't like me if he was."

He nodded solemnly. "You're a bad one, all right. Taking money out of strange men's pockets while they are unconscious. You know what they call that down at Hinkleman's Saloon, don't you?"

"What?"

"That's rolling 'em."

She really felt guilty about it. "Here!" she said. "You take the money."

"You want me to incriminate myself?"

"Please, you keep it—till we find out of he—if—"

Pastor Pete took the money. He was serious again. "I'll find out all I can about it. If the money was Jim Fogelsmith's, it belongs to his widow, of course."

"Of course. But—"

"But what?"

She was wondering what she would tell the man when he came to and found the money gone. I'll just have to tell him that I—rolled him," she said hollowly.

A flat, sardonic voice asked, "Did I understand you to say you rolled him?"

Cutter was lifting his head slowly. He came to a sitting position, folded his arms across his knees, and stared at her. "And you found a thousand dollars on him?" he asked.

Janie gulped. Cutter's words were like a rope wrapped around her neck. "I—I—"

"*I've* got the money now," said Pastor Pete quietly.

Cutter turned his glazed, smoky-gray eyes on him. "Looks like you're getting off your circuit, Preacher."

"I don't ride a circuit, Cutter. I just get around wherever I'm needed."

"You're not needed here."

"Seems to me I am. Very much."

CUTTER got to his feet. He dusted his clothes meticulously, felt of his head and smoothed his hair. He looked unruffled and unhurt.

"Somebody hit me," he said, thoughtfully, "in the back of the head. There was nobody behind me." He gave Janie a quiet, toothsome smile. "That couldn't have been you, Janie!"

Janie realized that she was still clutching the hame, and she held it tightly against her skirt, hoping he wouldn't see it. But he did.

"I believe you did, Janie," he murmured, "I really believe you did."

"Yes!" she cried out. "I did! And I'd do it again if I had to!"

"You *had* to?"

"You would have killed him, if I hadn't!"

"Oh! Well, now, maybe I would have. You see, he tried first to kill me. You saw that, didn't you?"

Janie had seen it. "He—he knew what you were going to do and he just beat you to it."

"You admit that he pulled his gun first, and started shooting."

"Yes, but—"

"You heard that, Preacher. If this should come to trial—well, here's the sheriff, now. We'll leave it up to him."

Sheriff Highstar filled the doorway almost before the sound of approaching hoofs had died away. He was short and square-cut. His face was something hewn from bluish granite, square jaws, square chin, even the end of his

nose was square. His shoulders were blocked out of the same stuff. He looked determined, humorless, and aggressive.

"Well! What's goin' on here?" he growled.

Cutter had the answer first. "Some saddle bum robbed Jim Fogelsmith and then tried to kill me when I accused him of it."

THE sheriff came in and looked at the two men on the floor, touching each with his toe. "Hum! Hum! He ain't dead. How'd that happen?" He gave the impression that it was very unusual for anybody to be alive after a fight with Cutter.

"Ask Janie," said Cutter.

The sheriff swung on Janie. "What'd you have to do with this?"

"N-nothing much. I just—I just —"

"She just busted me over the head with a hame, and then rolled the saddle bum for a thousand dollars," Cutter explained genially.

Pastor Pete spoke. "It seems to me we're forgetting the most important part of this case. Cutter shot Jim Fogelsmith, and now Jim is dead. That ought to interest you more than anything else right now, sheriff."

"I know all about that," said the sheriff brusquely.

"And you don't think it necessary to take any action in the case?" persisted Pastor Pete.

"I don't think it necessary to make any reports to you, Sky Pilot."

Cutter explained smoothly, "I have told the sheriff all about it, and he agrees with me that I was not to blame."

"I haven't heard all about it," said Pastor Pete. "Would you mind to tell me how it happened?"

"Not at all," Cutter said readily. "I walked into Doc Everlitt's office this morning and Fogelsmith was there, alone. He had taken something from one of the cabinets, and I asked him what he was doing. He tried to get past me, without answering, but I blocked the door. He yelled at me to get out of his way or he'd kill me. Then he went for his gun. Naturally, I shot him."

"Naturally," Pastor Pete agreed drily. "You shot him. Then what happened?"

"He got to his horse, which was tied out front, and rode away."

"Do you know what he took from Doctor Everlitt's office?"

"No."

"He didn't take the money from the doctor's office?"

"No."

"Then where did he get the money?"

Cutter hesitated. "At the bank. I happened to be there when he borrowed it."

"Jim Fogelsmith borrowed a thousand dollars, and got it in cash?"

CUTTER said nothing. He seemed to be getting uneasy.

"Where did Jim go when he left the bank?" Pastor Pete asked, his keen dark eyes boring into Cutter's smoky gray ones; his voice, vibrant and strong from years of public speaking, held a grim persistance.

"He went across the street to Doc's office," Cutter said shortly.

"And you followed him, knowing he had a thousand dollars in cash," said Pastor Pete.

Cutter smiled briefly. "You wouldn't be trying to make out a case against *me*, would you, Preacher?"

"You followed him, and you shot him, but he got away from you. Is that it?"

"Hear the man talk!" chided Cutter. "Would you like to have the sheriff arrest me, Preacher?"

"I would. But I don't think he will. I don't think he's honest and courage-

ous enough to arrest you."

The sheriff snorted. "I'll take care of my business, and you take care of yours, Preacher! What about this thousand dollars, that's what I want to know now?"

"Naturally," said Janie, pleasantly, "the sheriff is more interested in a thousand dollars than another killing by Mr. Cutter."

"You keep out of this!" snarled the sheriff.

"But she is part of it," Cutter pointed out. "A big part. She got the thousand dollars."

The sheriff said, "Hand it over!"

"I've got it now," said Pastor Pete.

"Then you hand it over!"

"I must refuse, sheriff. I'm holding it in trust."

The sheriff blustered, "You want me to throw you in jail?"

"If you care to."

The sheriff made a sour face. "They'd tear the jail down, if I throwed you in—and you know it. You're a-gettin' too high and mighty around here." He turned away in helpless disgust. "Give me a lift with this bum, Cutter," he said, walking over to Peppermint.

They picked him up and started out, ignoring the still unconscious Climax.

"What are you going to do with him?" demanded Janie, blocking the door.

The sheriff shoved her aside. "I'm takin' him to jail."

"What for?"

"For robbin' a dead man, of course. And I reckon I'll take you along for robbin' *him!*"

But the sheriff had his hands full just then. Peppermint made a good load for two men. They threw him across the sheriff's saddle. Then the sheriff turned back to Janie. "Come along!" he said.

"I'll be responsible for her," said Pastor Pete.

"You don't have to be," said Janie. "I'll go with him!"

"But, Janie! I'll take care of you."

"And who'll take care of *him?*" she asked.

Pastor Pete murmured something about angels and fools. "Then we'll all go to jail!" he announced.

The sheriff said, "No, you don't! I ain't lockin *you* up!"

"That's entirely up to you. However, if I want to visit the jail, I suppose I may?"

The sheriff groaned. "For a preacher, you stick your nose in more damned places—" Resignedly, he led the way down the street, he and Cutter holding Peppermint on the saddle.

Janie was determined to guard the helpless prisoner until he regained consciousness at least. She knew the methods of Cutter too well. She knew the sheriff would turn his back, if Cutter requested him to; then it would be so easy for the sheriff to report that his prisoner had died from injuries received in the fight—a fight that the prisoner had started.

She followed the sheriff and Cutter as they carried the prisoner into the jail. She was beginning to think that he might be hurt worse than she had thought at first.

"Are you going to get Doc Everlitt?" she asked.

THEY carried him into a cell and dropped him on a bunk. "He'll come around, all right," grunted the sheriff.

Janie appealed to Pastor Pete to get the doctor, and he said he would. She walked into the cell.

"Get out of here!" said the sheriff. "If you don't want me to lock you up."

"I want you to lock me up," she said.

The sheriff snorted. "You think I won't?"

"I think you will. I robbed—rolled a man, didn't I? Isn't that against the

law?"

He took her by the arm and marched her out of the cell. "You're awful smart—or awful dumb! Don't you know I couldn't lock you up, with him?"

"Then put me in the next cell beside him."

"I'll put you over my knee, and give you a wallopin'! That's what you need!"

She stood her ground and wouldn't leave the corridor. "I'm staying here till he comes to," she announced.

Apparently satisfied that Janie could hold her own, Pastor Pete went for the doctor. Janie posted herself in front of the locked door of the cell. Left alone, she was astonished at her own boldness.

"What am I acting this way for?" she asked herself. "This man means nothing to me—nothing at all! Just because he kissed me is no reason I should make a fool of myself—is it?"

But she couldn't talk herself out of it. Anyway, she wanted to ask him about the money. Everything seemed to depend on that. If he had actually robbed a dead man, he was low-down and despicable. She would have nothing more to do with him.

"But he didn't do it!" she said, half aloud.

His heavy breathing stopped with a choking sound, and his head rolled to one side. He was facing her as his eyes opened. Instead of bringing her relief, his prolonged stare increased her uneasiness.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Are you hurt? How do you feel?"

He only stared.

"Don't talk if you don't feel like it," she said. "The doctor's coming right away."

He propped himself up on one elbow. "What happened?" he muttered.

"You were in a fight—don't you remember?"

"Who was I fightin' with?"

"Mr. Cutter—and Climax. Down at the wagonyard—don't you remember?"

He did suddenly, and violently. "The wagonyard! The Devil! Hey!" He began fumbling at his pockets. "The money! It's gone! Where's that money?"

"It's safe! Pastor Pete's got it."

"Pastor Pete? Who the hell is *Pastor Pete?*"

"He's a preacher. He's my friend—everybody's friend. He'll help you."

"Wha'd he take my money for?"

"I took it. It *is* your money, isn't it? You didn't—you didn't—"

He sat up. "Hell, yes, it's my money!"

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

He was staring at her again, filling her with doubts, and giving her the creeps. "What are you doin' here?" he asked.

"I'm just—just waiting. I didn't want them to—I was afraid Cutter might—"

"Cutter? Oh! Did I get him?"

"No. He got you."

"The hell he did! I ain't dead. Am I?"

"Of course not. But you're in jail, you know."

"Huh! That's nothin'. There's no calaboose can hold me, very long."

Nor did Janie find this very reassuring. So he had been in jail before, had he?

"My brother'll help me get out, because we got work to do. If I could get word to him, somehow—" He looked at her speculatively.

"Would you like for me to tell him? Where do you live?"

"We're camped at a water hole ten miles south of the Two Lazy-Two ranch. Know where that is?"

Janie knew. "I'll get him," she promised.

He looked as though he were wondering why she should make such a promise, and she was beginning to wonder the same thing. She tried to explain it, both to herself and to him. "I feel sort of to blame for what happened, since it was at my place. When anybody puts up there, I look after 'em, the best I can—and you, well, you needed somebody to look after you."

HE GRINNED a little, stood up unsteadily and groaned. Then he sat down again. "Maybe you're right." He looked at her doubtfully. "You took my money, and give it to some preacher? Where's he at?"

Janie caught a glimpse of Pastor Pete coming across the street, and she moved nearer the window. "Here he comes now," she was glad to report. She needed him to explain her action in taking the money—and she wanted him to return the money now.

She went down the corridor to meet him. "It's his!" she announced confidently.

"Is it?" he said, thoughtfully. "How do you know?"

"He said it was, and—" And that was all. He *said* it was.

"I'll talk to him," said Pastor Pete.

The way he talked to him made Janie hold her breath. "You say this money is yours?" he asked. "Where did you get it?"

"I—got it from a man I sold some horses to."

"What's his name?"

"Uh—Joe—Something-or-other. Joe Smith, I think. Why? What's it to you?"

"Where does he live?"

"Why—up on the Rim—way out in the Goldfield country."

"I think we'll have to give you a chance to prove that," said Pastor Pete. "I've just been talking to the banker." He included Janie, now, talking more gently. "Jim Fogelsmith went to the bank this morning and borrowed a thousand dollars, just as Cutter said. Jim's wife has cancer, and Doc Everlitt said he could cure her, but said he had to have twenty-five hundred cash to get some radium. I don't believe that, and neither did Charley, down at the bank. He wouldn't loan Jim twenty-five hundred, but he finally let him have a thousand. He says this is the money. He remembers the denominations, and it all tallies—except for five dollars."

Janie had been preparing herself for something like this, so there was no big surprise to it; but it hurt her just the same, even more than she thought it would.

"I—I have the five dollars," she said. "He gave it to me. He bought peppermint candy with it. Stick Candy! He wanted five dollars' worth."

She laughed bitterly. There was something so ludicrous about it. A man, a gunman, a thief—coming to town and buying stick candy with his loot! A man who kissed her, and thrilled her, and had her defending him! Why, he wasn't a man, at all. He was just a boy—a big bad boy. He ought to be paddled and put to bed.

He looked as though he had been. He crouched on the cot, sulking and scowling, exactly like a bad boy who had been punished.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself—sonny?" she asked.

He glared at her and then at Pastor Pete. "I say that's my money! I worked like hell for that money. I trapped a hundred wild horses, and rassled 'em, and broke 'em for that thousand dollars. And you ain't goin' to gyp me out of it, either!"

Janie wanted so much to believe him. She looked at Pastor Pete questioningly, appealingly. Pastor Pete did not seem to be much impressed.

"After all," she said, "Charley

couldn't say for sure it's the money he gave Jim Fogelsmith, just because it's the same denominations—"

"Cutter says that Climax saw him searching Jim's body."

"Cutter!" she said scornfully. "And Climax! What was Climax doing out there, I'd like to know?"

"Cutter must have told him to follow Jim, after he had shot him. I think Cutter was after this thousand dollars and was willing to kill Jim to get it. But Jim got away from him, and he sent Climax after him. Before Climax caught up with him, Jim fell off his horse, dead. This fellow came along and robbed him—just before Climax got there. Maybe Climax was close enough to see him do it."

It all sounded plausible to Janie, and if she could keep her feelings out of it she would say that was exactly what happened. "But—we can't be *sure,*" she said.

"We'll probably never be sure about it," Pastor Pete admitted. "You can't expect Cutter or Climax to confess anything—or this man either, I suppose. But we can check up on him and find out if he is a wild-horse trapper, and if he sold some horses to somebody for a thousand dollars. In the meantime, I'll keep the money."

"WELL—" Janie avoided the glaring, accusing eyes beyond the bars—"do what you think best." If anybody in the world could be trusted to find out the truth, and to act with fairness, it was Pastor Pete.

"I'll write to Joe Smith, in Goldfield," said Pastor Pete. He peered sharply through the bars. "That's what you said, wasn't it?"

"That's what I said," came the gruff response. "He runs the Arrow 8."

Pastor Pete nodded, turned back to Janie. "You ready to go now?"

"How about Doc Everlitt? Is he coming?"

"I couldn't find him. Looks like this man's going to be all right, now."

"Well—I'll wait a little while longer."

Pastor Pete left her there, reluctantly. Janie faced her accuser, and felt that she was inside the bars, instead of him. "Fine work!" he said. "Takin' my money and givin' it to him!"

"But he'll give it back to you—if it's yours."

"I told you it was mine! I told you where I got it, and how I got it. But hell! I reckon there's no use to talk about it any more. Are you goin' after my brother?"

"Yes," she said. "I'll get him." . . .

It was late that afternoon when Hub saw her coming. Hub had spent the day moping about the camp, drinking black coffee and trying to get his stomach to stay in place, and his nerves to stop jumping.

He was glad that Peppermint wasn't around to witness the disgraceful twitching of his shoulder, the spasmodic contraction of the cords of his neck. Were these signs of fear? Would they pass away, and would he be able to forget that slimy, glittery-eyed thing that had scared him half to death? Would he ever be able to lie down on the ground and go to sleep again? He might fix a bunk out of some fence rails and rope. But if he did could he endure Peppermint's taunts?

These had been this thoughts all day, and Janie brought a welcome end to them. She was welcome in a lot of other ways too; first of all because any visitor was welcome.

Hub got just as tired of Peppermint, as Peppermint did of him. There would be days and often weeks when he saw nobody else. It had been a couple of months since he had seen a girl, and it was no wonder he felt a little skittish. He held his shoulder rigidly, and stiffened his neck, but, weakened and jit-

tery, he was in no condition to face Janie's smile. It set his nerves to jumping worse than ever.

"I'm Janie McCall," she said. "You're Hub, aren't you? I'd know you anywhere, you look so much like your brother."

"Peppermint?" This pleased him, because women thought his brother good looking, but they never seemed to see him.

"Is that what you call him?" He didn't tell me that."

"He's kind of touchy about it, but that's what his friends all call him. He eats candy like a kid."

"Yes, I know. He's like a boy in a lot of ways, isn't he?"

"I hadn't noticed it. Are you—a friend of his?"

She said she was but she didn't seem very sure about it, and Hub was glad about that. "He never said anything about you."

"Oh, I just met him today."

Hub saw there was something wrong. "What's happened to him?"

"He—got into a fight."

Hub grunted. "That's nothin' new."

"But it wasn't his fault, actually. I saw it all."

"That *is* somethin' new. He usually starts 'em."

She looked at him disapprovingly. "Aren't you interested to know whether he's hurt or not?"

"Well, is he?"

"Yes."

"Humph. Where's he at?"

"He's in jail."

"That sounds natural. I reckon he wants me to get him out."

She said coldly. "You don't talk as if you wanted to help him."

"I don't," he said frankly. "He's always gettin' into some kind of fracas, and windin' up in jail. I'm gettin' fed up with it."

"Do you ever get in trouble?"

"No."

"How nice," she said, icily. "You must be an angel."

HE GRINNED uncomfortably. "Hardly. I just stick to work and keep my nose out of other folks' business, or try to." He saw that he had made a bad impression on her by saying just what he thought about Peppermint. Hub was used to saying just what he thought about anything, to anybody. It was hard for him to change a lifelong habit in a few seconds, but he made a determined effort. "Of course, I'll help him if he needs me," he amended lamely.

"I should think you would," she said severely. "I can't imagine anybody not helping his own brother when he's in trouble."

Hub took it meekly, and meekness was something he had never indulged in before. He didn't know what had got into him; maybe that snake had scared him worse than he thought. "Just what kind of trouble is he in?" he asked.

"He is accused of taking a thousand dollars—off a dead man."

"The hell he did!" Hub exploded. "This is about the limit! I've got him out of all kinds of—" He stopped, remembering his meekness, his kindly interest in his brother.

"You don't think he did it!" Janie exclaimed. Her voice faltered a little as she added, "D-Do you?"

Hub thought so, definitely. "Peppermint steal a thousand dollars? Oh, no!"

She seemed greatly relieved. "I knew he didn't! He told us where he got the money."

"Did he?" Hub parried.

She waited. "You know where he got it, of course."

If Peppermint had a thousand dollars, Hub knew damn well where he got

it. He stole it. "Uh—yes! Sure, I know!"

"Pastor Pete is going to write to the man, and ask him, and of course that will clear your brother."

"Will it?"

"Of course it will!"

"Well—that's fine." Hub was wondering who "the man" was, and how it would clear Peppermint, but he didn't dare to ask. He wondered if Peppermint had shot a man in a holdup. Peppermint had never gone that far, but had verged on it several times.

As he rode with Janie back to Quailtown, Hub made cautious inquiries and learned all she knew about the case. It had been smart of Peppermint to give the name of Joe Smith in Goldfield, because they had sold him some horses, and got a thousand dollars for them.

Hub was sure that Peppermint was guilty, but he didn't dare to tell the girl for the obvious and ironic reason that it would make her think less of *him*—not of Peppermint.

He saw that she was smitten with Peppermint, and was willing to stand by him, guilty or not. He saw that she expected the same sort of loyalty from him.

Loyalty, Hub was willing to concede, was a fine thing—if it was for something worthy, something you believed in with all your heart, and were willing to fight and die for. He did not feel that way toward his brother, and he knew that Peppermint did not feel that way toward him.

He and Peppermint had fought since they were big enough to stand up, they had disagreed violently on everything, they lived by different principles. Hub often wondered how they could be brothers and be so different. He would have doubted their relationship, if they hadn't looked so much alike.

Hub realized he couldn't tell Janie this. He had never told anybody, and he wasn't starting now. She might find it out for herself; she probably would if she got to know them well enough. Hub hoped and prayed that she would. He wanted her to understand it all. He was willing to let her judge him, when she knew.

He admired her for her staunch but misplaced loyalty to Peppermint, and yet he was intensely jealous of it. He felt sorry for her, because he knew she would find out Peppermint was guilty. He wondered what she would do then. He intended to be around mighty close about that time.

It was the first time he had ever been interested in any of Peppermint's friends. He couldn't believe she was his friend—or would be long. Her mind didn't work like his. She thought like Hub, on everything they talked about. Everything except Peppermint. And there was no more open disagreement on that, for Hub had learned his lesson. Hub had learned to hold his tongue and to wait, to be agreeable, to say "Yes," when he meant "No." Hub had learned a lot of things since he had opened his eyes that morning, and looked into the eyes of a snake.

IT WAS late in the night when they got to Quailtown, and there was not a light showing as they rode down the main street. When they turned at the bank building, they saw a lantern hanging in the jail and also a light in the sheriff's office.

This did not mean that the sheriff was up, they discovered. The door was locked, and the lamp inside turned low. "Maybe we'd better wait till in the mornin'," Hub said. "Reckon there's nothin' we can do tonight."

"You can at least talk to him," she said, "and let him know you're here." She pounded on the door, and pounded some more, and after a while the sheriff, shirtless and sleepy, came shuffling

into sight. "Wha'd you want?" he growled, opening the door just enough to get his head out.

"We want to see Peppermint," said Janie.

"Who?"

"The man you've got in jail. This is his brother."

"So what if it is! This is a hell of a time to be wantin' to visit a prisoner!"

"But we just got back!" protested Janie.

"That's too bad—that you got back. Go home and go to bed." The sheriff shut the door.

Janie hammered angrily on the door. "We want to see him!"

"Come back in the mornin'," called the sheriff.

"Well, I'll be darned! After me riding all night and half the day—!" Janie's voice broke. She was ready to cry.

"That's all right," soothed Hub. "He'll be all right tonight. We'll come back in the mornin'."

He put his arm about her shoulders. She shrugged it away. "I don't think you care anything about him!"

"Why—sure I do," he said in a hurt tone. "He's my brother."

She sniffled. "I—I guess I'm just tired out. I guess I'd better go home."

He went with her to the wagonyard, where they ate cold beef, and sour pickles. Hub was reminded again of his stomach. Janie showed him where to sleep. "It's Peppermint's room. He paid for it."

He didn't like the way she said it, as if he were an intruder, but he lay down gratefully on the bunk. There'd be no rattlesnakes sleeping with him tonight —he hoped.

He awoke to strange and stirring music: Janie's voice saying "Breakfast's ready!" To a man who had always fixed his own breakfast, or depended on his brother, those were thrilling words indeed.

Janie was again smiling and fresh and hopeful. Hub was soon under her spell and full of her ham and eggs and toast and grape jam . . . "I made it myself. How do you like it? . . ."

He walked with her down the street in a pleasant, dreamy daze, hardly knowing where he was going. Then he saw the jail and remembered Peppermint.

He reminded himself that Janie was interested in him only as a means of helping Peppermint get out of jail.

Gloom filled him as he followed Janie down the dark, cold little corridor. He could not have felt worse had he been going to jail himself.

"Hello, Peppermint," Janie said brightly. "I got him! See? We were here last night, but the sheriff wouldn't let us in."

Peppermint stared at him defensively.

He scowled back silently. Janie looked anxiously from one to the other.

"I don't know what *I* can do," Hub muttered. He caught Janie's look, and added hastily, "Of course, I'll do anything I can."

"They've got nothin' on me," growled Peppermint.

"Of course they haven't," Hub agreed.

Peppermint looked puzzled. He said: "Did she tell you—what they've got me in for?"

Hub nodded. "But you can prove you ain't guilty."

Peppermint stared. He looked like a caged badger, expecting somebody to prod him with a stick, but being offered instead a nice juicy ground squirrel.

"Soon as they hear from Joe Smith tellin' them he paid us a thousand dollars for them horses, and when I tell 'em you had a thousand dollars in cash when you started to town—that ought to prove somethin'."

PEPPERMINT'S eyes began to shine. It proved, of course, that Hub was going to lie for him. Good old Hub! Always willing to help him out of a jam. "You told the sheriff that?"

"Not yet."

"Why don't you tell him? Maybe he'll let me out now. No tellin' when they'll hear from Joe Smith."

"Sure, I'll talk to him," Hub agreed. "Don't worry. I'll get you out somehow."

Janie was sparkling. "I knew you could help him! I'll go get the sheriff —" She started off.

Hub stepped closer to the bars. "You dirty buzzard!" he hissed. "Robbin' a dead man! I ought to let you rot in there!"

This was what Peppermint had expected in the first place, and he was still puzzled. "What's all this talk out of the other side of your mouth?"

"I'm doin' it for her. But—you wouldn't understand that."

Peppermint gave him a calculating look. "Wouldn't I? Why don't you want her to know what a dirty, lowdown skunk I am?"

"I'm ashamed for her to know it."

"You're lyin', and I know it. Just like you knowed I was lyin' about the money. You fell for her, didn't you? And now you're tryin' to make a hit with her by helpin' me."

Hub should have known he couldn't fool Peppermint. No more than Peppermint could fool him. They knew each other's innermost thoughts.

Peppermint laughed tauntingly. "You're out on a limb, ain't you? You like the gal, and she likes me. If you don't help me get out of jail, she'll think you're a horse's heel. If you do, I'll take her away from you."

Hub walked away from him, seathing. Everything Peppermint had said was so bitterly true.

Janie had the sheriff cornered. "His brother will tell you—" she said. "Come on, Hub, you tell the sheriff—"

"Don't tell me nothin'," said the sheriff. "Tell Cutter, if you want to. He's the one that's makin' the charges."

Hub was ready to tell anybody, most anything. He had heard enough about Cutter to dislike him. Right now, he was anxious to get hold of somebody he could talk to, the way he wanted to talk.

"Where is this Cutter?" he asked.

"At his office, I reckon—if it ain't too early."

"Where's that?"

"Right down the street, at the undertakin' parlor. Janie'll show you."

Janie protested. There was no use to talk to Cutter, she said. Hub, she said, would just get into trouble.

"Would I?" Hub said. "Show me this undertaker. I'd like to look over his line of coffins."

He strode down the street with Janie begging him not to go. He rather liked that, too.

"Cutter is awful mean!" she said. "He's killed a lot of men. Look what he did to poor Jim Fogelsmith. Look what he tried to do to Peppermint!"

"That's what I'm thinkin' about," Hub said grimly. "He beat my brother up. You think I'm goin' to stand for that?"

"But that's all over!"

"Oh, no it ain't! When anybody jumps onto my brother, he's goin' to hear from me!"

Hub was working himself into a pretty fair fighting mood. Since he couldn't get his hands on Peppermint at the moment, he was quite willing to take on Cutter as a substitute.

The undertaking parlor was a long frame building at the end of the street —standing solemnly alone, screened by thick trumpet vines, castor bean trees, and tall sunflowers. There was a nar-

row porch with a white railing, and a white wooden bench near the door.

Hub cooled off a little at sight of it. This was no place to start a fight. It was too quiet, and sort of church-like. However, he couldn't turn back now.

He flung back the white frail-looking door, and stepped into a brooding, shadowy silence. He stared at a large cream-colored casket with silvery handles and fluffy silken lining. Beside it was an artificial wreath in the shape of a horseshoe. In the center were the words "My Dearly Beloved Husband" in paper flowers and leaves.

"What can I do for you?"

Hub couldn't tell from what part of that large, coffin-crowded room the voice was coming. He looked around slowly till he saw the tall, black-clad figure standing motionless by a high-backed, fancy-carved chair.

"Your name Cutter?" Hub asked.

HE HEARD the door open and close softly, and was glad to see Janie standing there. But even she was awed and silent.

"I am," said Cutter, as if he were announcing that he was God.

There was something majestic and supernatural about the man. Hub felt small and insignificant before him, as he sometimes did when standing at the foot of a large mountain, or at the rim of a deep canyon, or as he watched a thunderstorm gather in the hills.

"I'm Hub Beeson," he said with all the vocal strength he had, but it was like shouting in the wind. His voice sounded puny and lost.

"Yes?" came the voice of the Mighty, a little impatiently. Why trouble him with such a small matter?

"You've got my brother in jail!" Hub nearly busted a lung. He walked up to the man, where he could look him in the eye. He was afraid of no man in the world!

But a chill ran down his back, and he stared in sudden dismay. He had never seen the face of this man before, but he had looked into those eyes. Immovable, glazed, smoky gray, they held him in fascinated horror. There was no mistake about it: They were the eyes of *the snake.*

It was exactly as if the snake was coiled upon his chest once more, staring at him, daring him to make a move. He was in the same strange stupor of fear that had gripped him and held him for an eternity.

Rigid and motionless in every muscle, he forced his mind to function. He told himself he was standing in a room, facing a man he had never seen before. He told himself he was having a fit. But all the time he looked into those eyes, and knew they were the same. He knew every detail, every shade of color, but most of all he knew the venomous glare deep within them.

"His brother, eh?" murmured Cutter. "Yes, I see you are."

The eyes moved, and Hub could hardly resist the impulse to jump. Could he jump quick enough? No. The eyes were looking at him again.

Janie was coming now. Janie would scare the thing, and it would strike. Would she see it in time? Could she shoot its head off?

"We just wanted to tell you that you were mistaken, Mr. Cutter, about—Peppermint stealing the money," said Janie.

"Mistaken, am I?" Cutter was smiling now. "Was that what *you* wanted to tell me?" he said to Hub.

Hub nodded, but still couldn't speak.

"I'm never mistaken," said Cutter. "People who make mistakes are my best customers."

After a silence, Janie said, "Well—you'll find out. When we hear from the man who gave Peppermint the money." She touched Hub's arm. "Let's go."

He turned without a word and followed her, knowing anything he could say now would only make him appear more ridiculous. Out in the street, in the fresh air and the sunshine again, he shook off his weird hallucination. He reduced it to its simple, bitter form. It was fear. He had been afraid. Afraid of a man!

There was some excuse for his fear of yesterday. There was no disgrace in being afraid of a snake. But to be afraid of a man—

Janie was eying him speculatively. "I'm so glad you didn't argue with him," she said. "It wouldn't have done any good."

There was nothing he could say, no excuse he could make for himself. He knew he couldn't make her understand, for he couldn't understand it himself. All he knew was that a strange calamity had befallen him. He had discovered Fear.

Since yesterday morning he had experienced three emotional shocks—each one of them far greater than anything that had ever hit him before. The first had been brought on by the snake, the next by Janie, and the last one by the undertaker. The snake had terrified him, Janie had charmed and stirred him, and Cutter had crushed him into final and complete humiliation.

"I know just how you feel," Janie said, "and I think you showed wonderful self-control."

Was she trying to make excuses for him—or was she making fun of him?

"I went down there to knock hell out of him, and you know it!" he said savagely.

"Sure, I know it. And I know how hard it was for you to control yourelf. 'A man who would control others must first control himself.' "

"Huh?"

"I read that in a book. And it's true. It wouldn't be in a book if it wasn't."

HUB shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know nothin' about books—nor women."

She smiled brightly. "Then you've got so much in life ahead of you."

A moment before, he was of the opinion that he had lived a lifetime in the last twenty-four hours, touching both the heights and the depths; but now he wasn't sure. She was holding out a further promise, a faint hope that he might escape the black despair that had seemed to be the end of everything.

He glanced back and saw the tall funereal shadow of Cutter in the doorway. This was but a shadow, discernible only in dim outline, yet it was a shadow with eyes—the eyes of a snake. In his distorted fancy, Hub could see those eyes clearly, with all their venomous mockery . . .

As Cutter stood there, watching them go, there was indeed a venomous mockery in his eyes, and there was a tight smile on his thin, moving lips.

There was nothing Sutherland Cutter liked better than scaring people. It was an art which he practiced in connection with this business, because it gave him pleasure and added to his profits. He had surrounded himself with all the trappings of Death, and had so long dressed and acted his part, that he now believed himself to be the deputy of Death. He thoroughly enjoyed his fantastic reputation and the supernatural power he wielded in the community, a power induced by man's natural fear of death, but extending beyond and above that. After death, what? After death, the undertaker, the the grave, and the Great Beyond. As an undertaker, Cutter was a sort of celestial usher, who guided people from this world to the next.

Since nobody wished to be ushered into the next world people feared him, just as they feared death. They looked upon him as something not quite of this

world, nor entirely of the next. They did not hate him, any more than they hated death—though many had the best of reasons for doing so.

Cutter had carefully taken advantage of all the superstitions surrounding death, all of the barbaric customs, all of the sorrow and the tragedy—turning it all to his own advantage. Ushering the dead into the next world was not only highly profitable, but highly amusing. It was a great show, and he got to see it free.

He had come to Quailtown as a sickly, frustrated boy of sixteen. As the youngest of a family of six boys and four girls, he survived them all. Four of his brothers and all of his sisters had died of disease—pneumonia, and tuberculosis. His other two brothers had died in gun fights.

All he could remember of his early life was sickness and death and funerals. He had been terribly afraid when the first one died, and had run away at the sight of the coffin. The next time he watched the burying. The third time, he watched them lay out the body, and he helped to dig the grave. There was still a sort of terror in it, but also a fascination which continued to grow in him as his brothers and sisters continued to die. He knew he would die in his turn. It was inevitable.

But somehow he managed to live. Somehow he found his way to Quailtown, a morbid, queer, gangling youth without a dime in his pockets.

He prowled about town, hungry and afraid to speak to anybody. It was old Al Mannheim who took notice of him and befriended him. Mannheim owned the undertaking parlor. Young Cutter made a perfect assistant. He slept in a storeroom stacked with coffins. He talked to people only when he had to, and that was about business. He disliked and distrusted living people, but he liked dead people.

Mannheim was old and in a few years willingly turned the business over to Cutter. Funerals became more elaborate after that, and more expensive. The increased profits Cutter kept for himself, and soon he owned the business. After ten years, he owned a saloon, a hardware store, a large interest in the bank, and a big cowranch.

Cleverly and diabolically, he built up his wealth and his power and his unique position in the community. Yet he was never satisfied. The more money he made, the greedier he became. The more power he acquired, the more he sought.

CUTTER also had a unique sense of humor. He laughed at things nobody else thought funny. He laughed at the funny faces a man often made as he died, writhing from the agony of a gun wound. He laughed at the prices people paid for a pine box, covered with cloth and pillowed with satin. He laughed at the reverence with which people regarded the dead, and the way they sang songs and placed flowers on the grave, and the funeral sermons Pastor Pete preached, in which he told God what a fine fellow the dead man was—though he might have died of delirium tremens.

Now, he was laughing at Hub. He could have killed Hub of course, but it was more fun scaring him, first. There was very little satisfaction in shooting a man at first sight. There was no finesse in a common, abrupt killing. There was none of the joy of anticipation, no savoring of a contemplated deed which, when well done, brought the keenest pleasure, but which was a disappointment when bungled by too much haste. Killing a man was a lot of fun, if you just took your time.

He had been too hasty with this man's brother. He had been thinking too much about the thousand dollars.

There was more pleasure in getting hold of a windfall of this kind than merely shooting a stranger.

Now, he would have to find out more about these brothers. He would probably kill them both, but first he would find out if the enterprise could also be made profitable.

"Climax!" he called.

The little red-headed man appeared at the rear of the store, his face a mass of bruises.

"You watch the front," Cutter ordered. "I'm goin' over to Doc's."

He found Doc Everlitt, who lived in well-furnished rooms back of his office, cooking his breakfast over a shiny new coal oil stove. Doc always had the latest and best in comforts and conveniences.

"What do you know about this fellow who's in jail and his brother?" Cutter asked, carefully arranging his coat tail so it wouldn't wrinkle before he sat down.

"What do you know about my radium?" Doc Everlitt countered crossly. He was a pot-bellied man with thin white hair and bags under his eyes.

"Radium!" Cutter scoffed. "Don't make me laugh."

"I won't if I can help it. When you laugh, somebody's dead."

"And you've usually killed 'em."

"But not on purpose, the way you do," Doc pointed out.

"Which proves you're a bungler, and I'm not."

"Who bungled the Fogelsmith case?"

Cutter's eyes glazed over. "You wasn't going to cut me in on that, was you Doc?"

"That was a legitimate case!" The Doc put down his coffee cup and clawed nervously into a box of cigars.

"The hell it was! You haven't got any radium. And if you had, you couldn't cure that old lady. You couldn't cure a sick pup."

"Is there any harm in trying?"

"In trying to get twenty-five hundred dollars out of a poor old man and woman that haven't got a dime, when you know you can't help 'em?"

"You're a good one to preach! You were willing to kill that poor old man for a thousand dollars!"

Cutter showed his upper teeth like a horse getting ready to snort. But he didn't snort. He smiled. "I'm not preaching. I leave that to Pastor Pete. I'm just telling you that I got onto your scheme, quite accidentally. I was in the bank when Fogelsmith came in to borrow the money, and I heard what he wanted it for."

"And then you followed him over here and shot him."

"Exactly. He was taking something out of that cabinet."

"My radium! It was in a lead container, about this size." The Doc indicated the measurements with his thumb and forefinger. "Didn't you find it when you went after the body?"

Cutter drew the container from his vest pocket and laid it on the table.

"You did find it!" The Doc picked it up, opened it, and closed it carefully.

CUTTER watched him with amusement. "Think you can sell that junk to somebody else for twenty-five hundred dollars, don't you? Here's luck to you. But if you do, remember, I'm in on it fifty-fifty."

"You're always in on my cases, but never let me in on yours," the Doc growled.

"Tell me everything you know about these two horse-trappers and maybe I'll let you in on this one."

Doc chewed glumly on his cigar. "You ought to know more about 'em than I do. They're working out on Two Lazy-Two range. Made a deal with Rye to use one of his pastures, I understand."

Cutter found this information most interesting. He owned the Two Lazy-Two ranch, and Rye was his foreman. "Rye didn't tell me anything about it," he murmured, "I wonder if he—"

"No, he's not trying to put anything over on you. He hasn't been to town since then. I talked to him out at the ranch the other day."

"You get around, don't you," Cutter said.

"Folks are always getting sick."

"And they get a hell of a lot sicker when you get there, don't they? But I'm not kicking, you understand."

"You oughtn't to, as much business as I throw your way."

Cutter laughed. "There's no other way to throw it, my friend. I have seen to that. Now, about these wild horsemen. Have they got any horses out there?"

"Not many, yet. But they plan on getting a hundred head."

The glow of a pleasant idea warmed Cutter. He saw where the profit in this deal lay. "A hundred head, eh?" he said. "How much would you say a hundred head of wild horses are worth, Doc?"

"Not much, unless they're broken."

"And if they're broken?"

"You know as much about that as I do. Twenty dollars a head, I'd say."

"A hundred horses at twenty dollars a head. That's about two thousand dollars, wouldn't you say?"

Doc Everlitt watched him with a loathing he tried to conceal. Since Cutter had demonstrated his willingness to kill a man for a thousand dollars, another simple arithmetical calculation showed what he would do for two thousand dollars. He would kill two men.

While Doc Everlitt had killed a lot more people that Cutter could ever hope to, the Doc felt that his killing was on a far higher plane than Cutter's. The Doc was never blamed for any of his killings. Often he was praised instead for his heroic attempts at saving lives. If he was too lazy to wash his hands or the instruments he used and his patient developed an infection from which he died, who was there to say this caused the death? Who was there to blame the doctor?

In sharp contrast to the fear and loathing in which they held Cutter, the citizens of Quailtown admired the good doctor. They liked his genial bedside manner and his stock of good stories. They looked upon him as a friend and confidant in time of trouble. They trusted him, pathetically.

If he said an operation was necessary, they said, "All right, Doc. You know best." Only seldom did they say, "How much will it cost?" or "We'll get along without the cuttin', Doc." And if they did say that, they were heartless, pig-headed, and willing to see their loved ones suffer and die rather than spend the money for an operation.

So the doctor's methods were essentially the same as the undertaker's. He took full advantage of the ignorance and superstition of his people, and next to Cutter, he was the wealthiest man in the county. He fretted a little because in all other counties the doctors made more money than the undertakers—made more than anybody else, in fact.

"Thanks, my friend," said Cutter. "You have given me a two thousand-dollar idea."

"What do I get out of it?"

"You get the satisfaction of knowing you have helped a friend." He arose. "I must go now. I have a customer coming this morning."

Cutter went back to his place of business in a jovial mood. When a dilapidated buggy, drawn by a bony mare, drew up in front of the undertaking parlor, Cutter went to the door and held it open with a low solemn bow.

"Good morning, Mrs. Fogelsmith."

THE widow of Jim Fogelsmith stopped and looked at him—bewildered, grief-stricken. She shrank back.

"Come right in, Mrs. Fogelsmith. Do you want to see your husband?" he encouraged.

She nodded, fearfully. She did want to see her husband. And she had to ask permission of the man who had killed him.

Cutter watched her closely as she sidled past him, and he saw that he would have no trouble with her. He knew she had been told by the sheriff that her husband had been caught stealing the radium, and that he had picked up a gun from the table. She had been told that her husband was entirely at fault.

And his fault had been trying to obtain the magic medicine to ease her pain and save her life.

Cutter led the way to a small curtained, candle-lighted room at the rear. The dead man lay on a pillowed couch, and his position and his expression and everything about him was one of tranquility and peace.

It had taken a lot of time to fix him up this way, but Cutter had enjoyed every minute of it. And, now, here was his creation, his masterpiece ready for exhibition. And here was his audience —this woman, small, bent, and wrinkled. Fearful, faltering and alone.

Here was a dead person, serene and noble and dignified in death. And here was a living person, afflicted by all the ills and the fears and the uncertainties of the living.

Here was the reason Cutter liked dead people. Here was the reason he despised the living.

"Jim?" said the woman, as though she thought she could wake him at a word. He did look so life-like, so thoroughly familiar. She couldn't believe him dead.

Cutter understood all of this, and it thrilled him somewhat like the unfolding of a play which he had staged. But he had contrived a real drama, real people, real life and real death. Such a thrill, he was sure, could never come to those dealing in artificial dramatics.

"Jim!" said the woman.

Jim said nothing. That was because Cutter had arranged it so. Cutter had written no line for him to speak. Cutter had decreed that he lay on the couch, with his hands folded, with his eyes closed. Forever.

And now the woman approached her husband, hand outstretched. She touched him. And then she stood for a time as motionless as the dead man, her face as lifeless-white as his. Then she dropped, stricken, to the floor.

Cutter rubbed his hands appreciatively—the way an audience applauds. First act curtain.

He turned and walked noiselessly from the little room.

It was about thirty minutes before the widow came out, and Cutter was there to take her by the arm and lead her to a nice soft chair in front of the big gray casket. She was such a little thing, and she had shrunken up still more in that thirty minutes, and now she seemed almost lost in the big chair. Her lips had parched, and her eyes burned dry.

"This is a beautiful casket," Cutter said softly. "I thought you'd like this one."

Her eyes were on it, unseeingly.

"Do you like this one, Mrs. Fogelsmith?" he said with a trace of sharpness.

She started, looked at him, and shrank up some more. "What?"

"I selected this casket, thinking you would like it," Cutter said, again in his softly caressing voice.

"Oh! Oh—yes," she whispered. "It's —it's beautiful." And then she was silent.

"The price of this one is five hundred dollars," Cutter said, trying to keep the eager edge out of his voice.

"Oh!" She flinched as if he had struck her. "Five—five hundred—oh, no. I haven't any money."

"But you have the ranch," Cutter said. "It's all clear, I believe."

"Oh—yes."

"You can obtain the money from the bank, I'm sure. I'll see to it. Of course the five hundred includes all funeral expenses. It includes this beautiful wreath, which I made for you." He indicated the paper-flowered horseshow, dedicated to "My Dearly Beloved Husband."

IT WAS the "clincher." It was the final masterly stroke in his adroitly planned sales campaign. It brought a fresh flow of tears to the widow's eyes.

Cutter rubbed his hands. Curtain, second act.

The final act took place the following day. For the climax, Cutter had as an audience the entire community, and he was assisted by one of their number who had all of the eloquence, all of the passion, and all of the histronic ability of a professional actor—Pastor Pete. The fact that Pastor Pete was not an actor and that every word he said came from his heart and soul made the final act of this real-life drama more thrilling to Cutter.

Cutter knew that Pastor Pete detested him, and it was a constant source of amusement and satisfaction to him to reflect that the pastor helped him more than anybody else to build up the ceremonies and the superstitions by means of which he had grown rich. The singing, the flowers, the long procession to the cemetery, the sermon, and the praying were all part of the ballyhoo for Cutter's business. Not that the people who took part in it intended, or even thought of it that way. But this made it all the more perfect for him.

Let them sing and preach and mourn. Let the morbid gather around the grave. Let them dress up and have a holiday, a great emotional spree. All of this made funerals big business, with Cutter getting all of the profits.

He stood at the edge of the little crowd gathered at the graveyard and rubbed his hands. He hadn't listened much to Pastor Pete's sermon; they were all pretty much alike. And now the final prayer. It was over, this final act, just the way he had planned it.

But Pastor Pete was stepping out of character. He was starting to speak again, but his voice and manner had changed.

"We have been praying for Jim Fogelsmith, when we should be praying for ourselves," he said. "We have been cowards and fools. We have seen injustice and terror and murder, and what have we done? We have prayed to God to do something about it. No wonder God hasn't answered our prayers. No doubt he is thoroughly ashamed of us."

Cutter was taken by surprise. He suspected what was coming, but he didn't know how to stop it.

"Jim Fogelsmith was murdered!" Pastor Pete's voice lashed out over the crowd. "I know it, and you know it. What are we going to do about it?"

The crowd seemed spellbound. And so was Cutter.

"Are we going to let the murderer go unpunished?"

As each pair of eyes turned his way, Cutter felt as though double-barrelled shotguns were being swung on him.

"This is not the first time he has murdered, and it will not be his last—unless we stop him now!" shouted Pastor Pete.

It had taken him less than a minute to change that subdued, sorrowing crowd into a menacing mob. Cutter could feel the tremendous power the preacher wielded over them, and the

terrible power which they had—if they choose to use it.

He knew he had to do something, and do it quick. He walked forward boldly, towering head and shoulders above the crowd, and they fell back to let him pass. He stood beside the little preacher, showing them how much bigger he was, how much calmer. He had learned long ago to control his every emotion. He stared at them solemnly, and he saw the awe and the fear in their faces.

"I killed this man," he said calmly, "in self defense. If any man can prove different, let him say so now."

He waited. He turned to Pastor Pete. "Can you?"

"I know you murdered him," said Pastor Pete, "as well as I know there's a God in heaven."

"You can't prove that either, my friend. I am talking facts. You have accused me without facts. The law has exonerated me. Do you propose to take the law in your own hands?"

"It's about time somebody took the law in his hands, and enforced it in this country!"

"By mob rule?"

"By God's rule!"

"You're jumping the track again. God has nothing to do with this—if there is a God."

"God *will* have something to do with this. He will see that you are punished!"

CUTTER was watching the crowd, and he saw that the immediate danger was passed. By drawing the preacher into an argument about God, he could divert their interest.

But only for the moment. He saw that Pastor Pete was determined to force the issue, and with his influence he could probably bring about a trial—or something a lot worse in the form of mob action.

"I am willing to stand trial," he announced deliberately. "We'll go to the sheriff's office now, and you can file the charge against me, if you want to."

He was calling Pastor Pete's hand, and now it was a showdown.

"Very well," said Pastor Pete but Cutter saw that he had not intended to be side-tracked into such a move. He had intended to arouse public indignation first.

Still the danger was not over, it was only postponed. Something would have to be done about Pastor Pete.

"We'll go right now," said Cutter.

Pastor Pete went along, but not too willingly. The funeral ceremony was over except for lowering the coffin and filling the grave, and most of the crowd followed Cutter and Pastor Pete back to town. Those who had come out of morbid curiosity were getting more than their money's worth this time. Never before had a funeral wound up with such a surprising climax.

Cutter strode ahead, silently and majestically, forcing the little preacher into an undignified pace. Sheriff Highstar stood in the door of his little office staring at this procession in puzzled surprise.

"The preacher wants to file a charge of murder against me," Cutter announced.

The sheriff's jaw sagged considerably, altering the squareness of his face. "Murder?" he muttered. "Who—why?"

Pastor Pete, the accuser, was on the defensive. "You know who and why as well as I do. I charge this man with the murder of Jim Fogelsmith."

Sheriff Highstar shot a startled, inquiring glance at Cutter, and got a grim nod from him.

"You—want me to let him do this?" the sheriff asked.

"Why not?" Cutter lifted his voice so the crowd could hear. "He's a citi-

zen and has a right to demand my arrest. I am willing to submit to arrest and prove my innocence in a court of law." He thought that was a pretty nice speech; he had been rehearsing it on the way from the graveyard. As he stepped into the office he glanced down the corridor and saw Janie with the wildhorseman. They were visiting the prisoner.

Another brilliant idea came to Cutter: Here was a possible solution to his problem of dealing with Pastor Pete. Cutter knew his usual methods would not work in the present case. If he killed the preacher, he would be lynched —regardless of the way he staged it. So he had to find somebody else to kill him, or at least to be found guilty of killing him.

"I'm ready to be locked up," he said to the sheriff.

"You want me to put *you* in *jail?*" The sheriff was finding it hard to swallow this one.

"I'm accused of murder. What else can you do?" Cutter added, gently, "I'm just trying to make it easy on you, my friend."

The sheriff walked reluctantly with him down the corridor and unlocked a cell. Cutter stepped inside, removed his hat, and made a motion of dismissal.

Sheriff Highstar stared at him a moment, then turned and growled at the bolder ones of the crowd, who had pushed into the jail. "Everybody out! This ain't no circus!"

He cleared the corridor of everyone except Janie and Hub.

Cutter looked through the bars at them with a wry, calculating smile.

"And now *I'm* in the jug," he said, trying to be chummy, but finding it beyond his talents.

They said nothing and he retreated to the hard little bunk that was hinged to the farthest wall and sat down.

"Don't you think we'd better be going?" said Janie.

Hub agreed with her, and she said, "We'll see you tomorrow, Peppermint."

After they had gone, Cutter tried again to strike up a conversation. "What was that Janie called you—Peppermint?"

"Is that any of your damn business?" Peppermint retorted.

Cutter said no, he guessed it wasn't. "You're pretty sore at me, I guess."

"All I want is just another crack at you, that's all," said Peppermint.

CUTTER said no more until that evening after the sheriff had brought their supper. "Maybe I'm wrong about you after all, Peppermint," Cutter said, genially.

"You're mighty wrong if you think I've forgot you beat me up and then had me throwed in jail."

"But that was when I thought you had stolen that money. The sheriff tells me you swear the thousand dollars you had on you was yours, and they're writing to the man you said you got it from."

Peppermint grunted. "Well, what of it?"

"Who's got the money now?"

"That damned preacher!"

Cutter was delighted. "Still got it, has he? What right has he got to it?"

"That's what I'd like to know!"

"Maybe he don't intend to give it back to you."

"He'll give it back to me, all right—soon as I get out of here!" Peppermint fumed.

After a thoughtful silence, Cutter said, "You know, I feel kind of bad about what happened to you. I think I'll tell the sheriff to let you out of here."

Peppermint glowered. "Tryin' to rawhide me, huh? Well, wait till I get out—"

"Not at all. I think I've done you a

big wrong, and I'm sorry about it."

"Gettin' scared, huh? Thinkin' about what I'll do when I get out?"

Cutter gave him an inscrutable stare. "No, I don't think you'll hurt me, son. You'll see that I'm a pretty square shooter." He called, "Sheriff!"

Sheriff Highstar came promptly.

"I want you to release Peppermint," Cutter said.

"Huh?"

"I've been talking to him, and I think I've done him a great injustice. I withdraw the charges against him."

The sheriff waggled his head. "All right," he sighed, as if he were giving up any further attempt to fathom Cutter's strange behavior. "Whatever you say."

He unlocked Peppermint's cell.

The amazement of Peppermint's face gave way to beaming pleasure. "Is this on the level?"

Cutter smiled, and extended his hand. "I'm sorry for what happened."

Hesitantly, Peppermint shook hands with him. "I reckon you ain't as bad as I thought you was." He grinned. "You know what I thought when I first seen you? I thought you looked like the Devil."

Cutter was pleased. "And what do you think of me now?"

Peppermint chuckled. "I still think you look like the Devil. But I reckon you ain't."

He followed the sheriff back to the office and was given his gun, pocket knife, cartridge belt, bandanna, and about three dollars in change. Peppermint looked ruefully at the money and thought about the thousand dollars.

Did he dare to go to the preacher and demand it? If he didn't it would look as though he had lied.

"Where does that preacher live?" he asked.

"Right up the street, north of here, about a hundred yards. A little white house with a fence around it."

He shook hands with the sheriff, said "So long," and stepped out into the street.

The sheriff went back to Cutter's cell. "What in hell—" he began.

"Let me out of here!" Cutter demanded.

The sheriff fumbled at his keys, "But —"

"Hurry up, I want to follow that idiot!"

It was early in the evening, with only the brighter stars beginning to appear. They looked exceptionally bright and beckoning to Peppermint, and suddenly, so did the whole wide world. He was free, and the world once more belonged to him—almost.

An opportunity as bright and as beckoning as those stars lured him on. Up the street a little ways was a thousand dollars he could have if he demanded it. A thousand dollars! Fifty broncs, trapped and broken and delivered. Months of hard work. Lonely, boring days with Hub.

HERE was a far easier way to make a thousand dollars. Here was a pleasanter way to live. Peppermint was beginning to like it here in town, in spite of the fact that he had spent all but the first few minutes of his time in jail. Those first few minutes had counter-balanced the hours behind bars, and the visits of Janie had been thrown in for good measure. Peppermint thought he'd like to live in town—run a wagon-yard, maybe—buy half-interest in one, anyway—could he do that with a thousand dollars?

He found the little white house with the fence around it, found it had a friendly, generous air. A lady came to the door and smiled at him just as if she had been expecting him.

"Is the preacher home?" Peppermint asked.

"Yes. Come right in!"

She took him through a parlor in which he got a glimpse of a tall Cornish organ, a fireplace, and a cat asleep in a rocking chair. The preacher was in a little room filled with books. There was a desk in it, and just two chairs.

"Well, well!" He stood up and extended his hand. "How are you, Peppermint?"

The lady went away.

"Sit down," said the preacher, cordially.

Peppermint was feeling better all the time. He liked these people, and obviously they liked him. He would have no trouble at all in getting the money.

"Ain't you surprised to see me?" he chuckled.

"I'm never surprised to see anybody," said Pastor Pete. "They all come to see me, and they're all welcome."

"But you wasn't expectin' me to get out of jail so quick, was you?"

"You've been exonerated?"

"Hell no! Do I look like I'm dead?"

Pastor Pete laughed. "Exonerated, I said—not executed. Did the letter come from Joe Smith?"

"Nope. Cutter just told the sheriff to turn me loose. And he did."

Now the preacher seemed surprised, and puzzled. "That's peculiar."

"Yeah, ain't it? I reckon he's not such a bad egg, after all."

Pastor Pete lowered his chin into his cupped hands and sat thinking.

"I just thought I'd drop around and get that thousand dollars," Peppermint said carelessly.

The preacher looked up sharply. "The letter hasn't come from Joe Smith, you said."

"It will," Peppermint said, confidently. "The money's mine."

"Does Janie know you came here?"

"I—reckon not."

"Does she know you're out of jail?"

"No, not yet."

"Then you'd better talk to her, hadn't you?"

"Why?" Peppermint was fast losing his patience. It was all right to horse around awhile and be friendly, but after all, he had come after a thousand dollars. "What's she got to do with it?"

"She gave the money to me, and I couldn't turn it over to you without her permission."

"She took the money out of my pocket! You know that, don't you? Does that give her a right to tell you what to do with it?"

"In a way, yes."

"In a hell of way! It's my money, you know!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know that."

Peppermint was getting pretty mad. The damned preacher had just been putting on, acting so friendly. Peppermint didn't like that kind of a man and he said so. "It's my money, and I want it!"

But he saw he couldn't scare the preacher into giving it to him. "I know just how you feel—if the money is yours. And if it is, you'll get it. Don't worry." He smiled. "You'd better go along now and think it over. Go see Janie. She'll be glad to know you're out of jail. But—I still don't understand that."

He stood up. Peppermint permitted himself to be eased out of the house, just as hundreds of times he had eased an unwanted bronc out of a corral. He had to admire the way the preacher did it, although he was still mad as he started off toward the wagonyard.

IT WAS quite dark now, and he had to pick his way along the winding path. A few minutes later he heard a pistol shot and it sounded as if it came from the preacher's house.

But that couldn't be. The preacher wouldn't be shooting at anybody, now,

would he?

Peppermint stopped abruptly. What if somebody was shooting at the preacher?

That was even less probable. A man might get mad at him, but not mad enough to shoot him.

Peppermint walked on. At the wagonyard he found Hub and Janie sitting cozily at a table in her room with a plate of cookies and a pot of tea. It was quite a shock, particularly the tea. Peppermint, himself, was beginning to feel the softening effects of city life, but not to this extent.

Janie was startled to see him. "How did you get out?"

He took the lid off the little blue flowered pot and smelled of the contents. Sure enough. Tea. He stared down at Hub, who squirmed uncomfortably. "How'd you get out?" Hub echoed.

"Tea!" said Peppermint.

"Tell us!" breathed Janie. "You didn't—bust out?"

He looked at her solemnly. "I would have, if I'd knowed what was goin' on."

A faint flush came into her cheeks. "What do you mean?"

"Tea," he sneered.

She lifted her chin, gave him a steady look. "Don't you like tea?"

He guffawed. "Me? Tea?" It was very funny, especially the way Hub looked—kind of sick, as if he'd been scared by a rattlesnake again.

Suddenly, hardly knowing what he was doing, Peppermint picked up Hub's cup and threw the hot tea in his face. Hub sat still for a moment, then he got up very slowly. "What did you do that for?" he asked.

He wasn't mad, and Peppermint wasn't afraid of him till he got mad. "Drinkin' tea," Peppermint taunted. "Behind my back."

Hub didn't look so sick now, but he looked uncomfortable, and scalded.

"Let's get this straight right now," Peppermint went on. "She's my girl. You know that, don't you?"

Hub didn't answer.

"Maybe you thought maybe you could take her away from me while I was in jail."

"Peppermint!" Janie cried. "What are you talking about?"

He looked down at her calmly, coldly. "Haven't I been talkin' plain enough?"

"You've been talking crazy!"

"Have I?"

"Yes!"

"Was I talkin' crazy when I said you was my girl?"

It was Janie, now, who looked as if she'd been scared by a rattlesnake.

"Well?" said Peppermint.

"I—I don't know! This is so silly! Give me a chance to—to think about it!"

"You've had a chance—while I was in jail. Haven't you been thinkin' about it?"

Janie said, very low, "Yes, I have." Then, with more spirit, "But I haven't decided anything. I haven't had time! My goodness! Do you know how long it's been since I first saw you? About thirty hours! And most of that time you've been in jail. Can I make up my mind—" she snapped her fingers—"like that?"

Peppermint was beginning to feel better about it. Maybe he had been pushing her too hard. "All right, honey," he said, "take your time. I'll give you another thirty hours. And there won't be no bars between us."

He walked up to her, put his arms around her and started to kiss her. He had forgotten Hub till he felt a vise closing on his shoulder, twisting him around, and now he was facing his brother.

"She told you she hadn't made up her mind, yet," Hub said.

STILL, he didn't look mad. But he looked strange, powerfully strange. He looked as if he was ready to jump into a nest of rattlesnakes, and pop their heads off, one by one.

Peppermint began to feel a little sick. He tried to grin. "All right," he muttered. "I heard what she said. I'll—give her time."

Hub turned him loose, and then a voice said, "Stay where you're at! Both of you!"

Sheriff Highstar stood in the door of Janie's room, which opened directly into the store. The sheriff had come silently through the store. He had his gun out.

He walked toward Peppermint.

"What's the idea?" Peppermint snarled.

"Never mind the talk. I'll take your gun."

He reached for it. But he didn't take it. Peppermint whirled and smacked the sheriff on the jaw with the speed and about the force of a wild mustang dodging a rope and kicking at a fallen rider.

As the sheriff toppled backward, Peppermint pulled his own gun and smashed his over the head. That would take care of the sheriff for awhile, he decided.

"Oh—!" wailed Janie. "What did you do that for?"

"Wha'd *he* do that for?" Peppermint growled. "He let me out of jail, himself. And I ain't goin' back!"

"You'll be goin' back when he comes to!" warned Hub.

"Like the devil I will!" Peppermint was confused, except on that one point—he didn't like to be in jail, and he didn't expect to go back to jail.

"You'll have to get out of town, then," Hub said, with a trace of satisfaction.

"Yeah? And what'll you do? Stay here—with her?"

Hub said, "What I do is my business."

"No it ain't. It's my business. You know we've got a bunch of wild horses trapped, and we've got a lot more to catch. Looks like we better get to work."

Usually it as Hub who talked this way. He seemed quite reluctant now to go back to work. But he agreed that was the thing to do.

"But—what'll I *tell* him?" Janie worried, looking at the unconscious sheriff.

"Don't tell him nothin'!" said Peppermint. "He made a mistake, that's all. And he when wakes up, he'll know it. If he don't, and if he figures on comin' after me, you might tell him that he'll be makin' a lot worse mistake."

Before they got away, Peppermint found an opportunity for a private word with Janie. "Now, I want you to get that thousand dollars from the preacher," he told her. "I'll be after it later."

"Maybe he won't give it to me," said Janie, in fresh distress. "You get it," Peppermint ordered. "You gave it to him, and it's up to you to get it."

"Well—I'll try."

"Tryin' ain't good enough. You get it!"

As they started off, he thought of the two buckets of candy and tied them to his saddle. He expected Hub to open up on him as soon as they got away, but Hub was glumly silent all the way back to camp.

Their work started that night. Shortly after they had rolled up in their blankets, they heard the snort of a stallion as he approached the water hole with his brood of mares.

The big horse was dimly visible in the starlight as he came forward, his nostrils fluttering with suspicious inquiry. Nearing the gate to the high brush corral which enclosed the water hole, he stopped stone-still. For a long time he stood, then whirled suddenly and went

tearing off, followed by his mares.

But he was back again shortly, and this time he sent one of the mares ahead to investigate, while he stayed far in the rear. Smart horse, thought Peppermint.

The mare sniffed and snorted a little and decided there was no danger. Hub and Peppermint were lying behind the brush fence, where the wind would not betray them. They heard the mare pick her way carefully through the gate, and over the rope which was covered with dirt, then go on to the water hole. Others followed, and finally the stallion walked in.

Peppermint jerked the buried rope and the gate swung shut. Instantly, the horses made a wild break for the gate, but instead of the opening through which they had entered, they found strange bars much higher than they could jump. They pounded around the circular corral, led by the stallion, screaming his fear and rage. There were several colts in the bunch and one of them was knocked into the water hole.

HUB went around to the gate which opened into the bigger adjoining corral. In here were about forty horses previously trapped. They were now in an uproar.

Hub opened the gate between the two corrals, ran back and seized an old gunny sack that hung from the entrance gate and began yelling at the newly trapped bunch. Peppermint joined in and they hazed the new ones into the corral with the others. Then Hub shut the connecting gate and fastened it, while Peppermint went back and opened the outside gate, and buried his rope again.

Once more they lay down to wait for another bunch, or to sleep if no more horses came that night. All of this had been done without a word between them.

Just as silently, they went to work the next morning, cutting out knotheads and old mares and young colts. Peppermint was anxious to get it over with. The strain of waiting, and of working with Hub was getting unbearable.

Would the sheriff come after him? What had he tried to arrest him for? Would Janie tell the sheriff here he was? Would she get the thousand dollars?

If he could get that money and the thousand dollars which would be his part for this bunch of horses, he'd be fixed up good. He could buy half interest in that wagonyard, and have plenty left over. He told himself if he wanted that wagonyard he could get it for two dollars: The price of a marriage license. But he was not sure he wanted it that way.

Whatever happened, he was quitting Hub, and quitting the wildhorse game. There was too much work and not enough pay.

Some of the mares they had caught wore brands. These had once been tamed and, later, lured away by wild stallions. They were now wild, but still the property of the man who had branded them.

A half a dozen of these mares wore the Two Lazy-Two brand. They were to be held along with the orajanas, according to the agreement made with the foreman of the Two Lazy-Two.

Hub broke the strained silence with a gruff suggestion. "Let's hold them two spotted mares and the big bay with a white mane."

Peppermint was in the corral, on his horse, trying to cut the unwanted mares out, while Hub was at the gate to see that none of the rest of them got away. It was a job that required patience and skill, and neither Hub nor Peppermint were long on patience this morning.

"You see that Flyin' A on them spotted mares, and that Cross L on the

big bay?" Peppermint asked sarcastically. "That means they belong to somebody else, in case you didn't know it, and they've got a peculiar custom around here in case you sell a horse that don't belong to you. They take a length of rope and tie it around your neck and then—"

"I know they're branded. But I figure the man that owns 'em would be glad to have 'em caught."

"So you're goin' to find out who owns 'em, and take 'em back to him? That's fine! Seein' as we haven't got anything else to do. It'll give us a little exercise."

"No, I don't figure on takin' them anywhere. I aim to find out who they belong to, and send word for the owners to come and get 'em."

"Well, now! Ain't that jest too neighborly!"

"When they get here, we're goin' to have a bunch of horses broke and ready for sale," Hub said. "I figure it would be easier to get buyers to come look at 'em that way than to ride all over the country tryin' to sell 'em."

Peppermint thought this a pretty good idea, but he wouldn't admit it. "Where do you get all of them smart schemes, anyhow?"

"I don't get 'em from you," said Hub quietly.

But it was settled, and they lapsed once more into silence. Peppermint got his rope on a fine young stallion, a reddish roan with white markings. It was somewhat like lassoing a ton of dynamite at the moment of explosion. The blast fairly shook the corral, and there seemed to be horseflesh flying in every direction. Crashing into the brush fence, into the other horses, into the dirt, and into Peppermint's horse, the stallion fought everything including the rope. Finally with his eyes bulging and his wind entirely cut off, he sank down helplessly.

PEPPERMINT was off his horse, going down the rope, and Hub ran out to help him. Peppermint got hold of one hind leg and pulled it up to the forefeet, which Hub was tying together. The hindleg was tied in and the stallion was helpless. Peppermint had his knife out and the castration was over in a few seconds.

Unloosening the tie rope, Hub bounded for the gate and Peppermint lost no time in getting back on his horse. The released horse came up fighting, and Hub was over the gate just in time.

Peppermint began angling for a little brown two-year-old, and soon had the loop on him, and the same performance was repeated. It was a grilling task and required perfect teamwork. Any instant a careless or tardy move might mean death or serious injury for one or both.

"We might as well brand them Two Lazy-Two colts," Hub said, when all the other work was done.

"That wasn't in the bargain!" said Peppermint.

"I know it wasn't. But we can do it here better than they can out in the pasture, when we turn 'em loose."

Peppermint grumbled, but helped to brand three colts that were following three of the Two Lazy-Two mares.

That night they trapped four bunches, and the next day they had a hundred head, in addition to the branded stuff. The next job was to get them to the pasture. Some of them had been in the corral four or five days without feed and were getting lank. These would be easier to handle. The fresh ones would have to be starved down a bit too. In the meantime riding was started, and this was a man-killing job from start to finish.

Peppermint was about ready to give it up. He wanted to get back to town and see Janie, and see if she had got that thousand dollars. He suspected

that Hub was getting anxious to get back to town and see Janie, too.

"What'll you give me for my part of this outfit right now?" Peppermint asked, as he sopped up his last biscuit with sorgum molasses and bacon grease and gulped it down.

Hub was munching a hunk of jerked beef. His mouth dropped and he stared across the dying camp fire. "You pullin' out?"

Much to his surprise, Peppermint felt a stab of regret. And suddenly he was not at all sure he wanted to quit, or that he could. Hub had been part of his life ever since he could remember. His first recollection was a fight he had with Hub. Down through the years, his most vivid recollections were fights he had with Hub. Invariably, Hub had licked him, although he had taken every possible advantage. Two things were certain—Hub would always fight fair, and Hub would always lick him.

He'd had enough! He had a belly plumb full! "Hell, yes, I'm quittin'!"

He broke a stick of candy and popped it into his mouth. It was the sullen, defiant gesture of a kid that needed a licking, and he realized it as he saw the look Hub gave him.

"You ain't stayin' till we get these horses broke, and sold?"

Peppermint had to fight all of his natural inclination, all of his life-long habits—even his better judgment. But he had a feeling that disaster was near, that his time was running out. It would take too long to tame these horses and sell them. He had to break away—now!

Before he could speak, his ears caught the sound of a horse coming. He listened a moment, and there was a throb in his ears as his blood pounded to the rhythm of the approaching rider.

This was the sound he had been listening for, and fearing. He had stayed too long! He knew it now.

He jumped to his feet, snatched up his saddle and bridle, and raced for his hobbled horse. He heard Hub calling some advice but paid no attention. He scared the horse and lost more time than if he had approached quietly. No doubt that was what Hub had been hollering about.

But now Hub's voice reached him more plainly: "Hey! It's Janie!"

And so it was. Peppermint felt a little foolish and very much relieved. Maybe she was bringing him the thousand dollars! He finished saddling his horse and rode out to meet her.

HER first words brought back the fear that had sent him racing after his horse.

"They're coming out here!"

She reined up within touching distance, and threw out her hand and he grasped it tightly. It helped him to steady himself. "Who's comin'? And what for?"

"The sheriff and a bunch of men! They're coming after you!"

"But why? What in hell did he let me out for, if—"

"They say you shot Pastor Pete! You didn't—did you?"

Peppermint remembered his visit to Pastor Pete, and the gun-shot he had heard, afterwards. He muttered, "That was it! I heard it!"

"You heard what?"

"I went to see him, and after I'd left I heard some shootin'—and they think I done it?"

"Oh, but you didn't! Surely you didn't!"

"No, I didn't! I just had a talk with him, and then I walked away. Didn't they see who shot him?"

"No. And they won't believe you, I know they won't!"

Of course they wouldn't believe him. He whirled his horse and raced back to camp.

"Now, what?" Hub demanded.

"They think I shot the preacher, and they're comin' after me." He grabbed some grub and an extra box of cartridges.

"Did you?" Hub asked.

Peppermint was incensed. His own brother accusing him—Janie asking him — "Did you?" What did they think he was, anyway? There was no use to explain, no use to deny. Let them all think what they damned please! He was pulling out and he hoped he never saw them again.

"Hey!" he yelled, as Janie pounded up. "Did you get that thousand dollars?"

She shook her head in a bewildered way. "There was so much to do—so much to think about—"

"You *forgot it?*" Peppermint raved. "Well, of all the damn dumb—" He hit the saddle, and rolled his spurs.

"Where you goin'?" called Janie frantically. "Peppermint—?"

He didn't look back.

Janie started after him but her horse was very tired and started slowly, so Hub was able to get hold of the bridle reins.

"And where are *you* goin'?" he asked.

"Wherever he goes! I can't let him go—like this!"

He held the bridle firmly. "You can't go with him. He don't want you."

"I don't care! I want him! Let me go!"

"Take it easy, now."

She didn't take it very easy. She cussed him out. But he held her horse, and after she had vented her anger on him, she cried hard, then slid out of the saddle into his waiting arms.

He held her and said nothing, held her about the way he had held the horse, she thought. There was no more feeling to him than a horse, she thought. And then she looked into his face suddenly and saw it all there—how she had hurt him, and how he loved her, and how little hope he had of getting her.

It almost made her cry again. Everything had turned out so wrong. She should never have fallen in love with Peppermint. She had known that from the start, and she had tried hard to keep from it. But it was no use. He was so bad and so lovable, him and his peppermint candy, him and his thousand dollars.

She still didn't know whether that money was his, or whether he had stolen it. And she didn't care very much. If he had stolen it he had done wrong, of course. An everybody in the world had done some wrong. What was it Pastor Pete always said about there being so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us?

There was a lot of bad in Peppermint, and a lot of good. Bad or good, she loved him. One thing she knew: He hadn't shot Pastor Pete. Thank heavens, he wasn't that bad!

Hub said, "Here they come!"

It was astonishing how fast they had come. Janie had thought she was a long way ahead of them, but here they were, coming out of the timber to the south. Had they seen Peppermint before he disappeared over the ridge to the north? Evidently they had, for they were bypassing the camp, going on up the ridge.

Janie scrambled on her horse, and Hub did not try to stop her now. She saw him saddling up, and soon he overtook her.

"Where do you think he's goin'?" she called.

"I don't know—he probably don't either."

THEY were still half a mile behind the riders in the posse, when they topped the ridge. On the other side, a long slope dipped down into a thick growth of cedars.

Now they could see Peppermint. He was racing for the cedars, where he would be out of sight, at least. They could probably trail him, but this would take more time.

"He'll make it," Hub predicted. "He aways has been lucky. He'll get away."

Janie prayed, "Help him—oh, help him to get away!"

Her horse was tiring, and she knew she couldn't keep up the chase much longer. She had her eyes fixed steadily on Peppermint, so she wouldn't lose sight of him as he became harder and harder to see against the deep green background.

Suddenly he was gone, and Janie thought he had reached the trees. And then she saw the horse floundering on the ground. The horse had fallen!

Janie lurched in her saddle as though it had been her own horse. Her eyes blurred, and the cedar trees and the clearing and the struggling horse and the posse all ran together in a scalding sea. When she was able to distinguish objects clearly again she saw Peppermint on foot, running, and saw that his horse was still floundering about on the ground. She knew the horse had broken a leg.

There was no hope for Peppermint now. But he was running, trying still to make the cover of the cedars. He seemed to be close to them, only because he was so far away.

Janie realized how far he was when she discovered the cabin. It was out in the clearing but so well blended with the trees that she hadn't noticed it before. She realized that it was one of the Two Lazy-Two line cabins, and no doubt vacant at this time of year.

Peppermint was trying to get to the cabin. But why? He would be trapped there, surely. And the fact that he had tried to run away would only make it worse for him.

Janie could see now that part of the fault was hers. She had been too slow, and had not trusted him enough. She shouldn't have let him run away. He wasn't guilty, and he should have stood his ground and proved his innocence.

Was it too late for that? Would they listen to him at all? They *had* to listen. She'd see that they did!

Peppermint was at the cabin now. He disappeared inside it as the posse bore down on him.

The boom of a forty-five, mellowed by distance, came to Janie like a soft, sinister whisper.

Here was the reason Peppermint had taken refuge in the cabin. He intended to fight it out! He wasn't even going to try to prove his innocence. He would fight, and he would die, and they would call him guilty.

Janie didn't realize she was screaming till Hub, with his horse running beside hers, reached out and seized her by the arm and shook her. "Take it easy!" he commanded.

Take it easy? Let them kill him—and take it easy?

Many guns were pounding fearfully down there now, as the sheriff's party spread out and made a dash for the house.

Janie watched the charge helplessly, knowing she would not get there in time to stop them. Even if she were there how could she stop them?

Somehow, something did stop them. That something was obviously Peppermint. Two men fell before his steady blast, rolling from their saddles, while their horses whirled away with empty stirrups flapping.

The other riders were wavering, turning back. Janie began screaming again, in a kind of savage triumph now.

The posse gathered around the men who had been shot. Then they spread out for another charge.

"Wait! Wait!" All of Janie's frenzy was in that cry and it carried to the

circle of men below. They looked back, and they waited.

Janie was still crying "Wait!" as she raced up to the sheriff. He snarled at her, "Wait? For what?"

"He didn't do it!" she said. "He didn't shoot Pastor Pete!"

"Didn't he? Maybe he didn't shoot Nort Jenkins, and Luther Mays, neither!" He waved his hand at the two wounded men.

THIS was the charge against Peppermint now—a charge nobody could deny, and one that was more serious than the other, at the moment, for these men now were primed for vengence.

"You forced him to do it!" said Janie. "He knew you would kill him—"

"And he's right about that! All ready, men?"

"No! Wait! He'll shoot the rest of you!"

"Maybe," agreed the sheriff grimly, "but we'll get him!"

They started for the cabin. Janie tried to get ahead of them, but she couldn't get her horse to go that fast. Peppermint's sixgun began to bark, warningly, before they seemed to be within range of it.

One of the riders was going out ahead now, racing his horse at top speed. It seemed a suicidal dash, straight into that warning fusillade. He wasn't shooting. He was waving his hat.

Who was such a fool as to think Peppermint would not shoot him, simply because he kept his gun holstered? Janie knew that would never work, and she found herself cringing from the inevitable result.

Still the man did not fall. Who was he?

Janie glanced along the line of men, and then she looked around for Hub. He was gone.

And now she knew the rider out in front. It was Hub! He was leading the charge against his own brother!

Janie cursed him, and cried, "Shoot him, Peppermint! Shoot him!"

Hub whirled his horse, and was facing the oncoming sheriff and his posse. "Stop!" he yelled.

They wavered, but did not stop.

He drew his gun.

They slowed down, pulled up, facing him. Janie jerked her horse as he almost fell, and kept him going. She got there in time to hear Hub say, "*I'll* go get him. Stay back there where you are!"

He didn't wait for an answer, but turned again toward the cabin, holstering his gun.

Janie clattered after him. He looked back at her. "You, too! Stay there!"

Janie could see things a little clearer now, and she saw that Hub, instead of leading the attack on Peppermint, had stopped the charge which could only have resulted in his death.

She laughed, to keep from crying. But it was hardly the time to laugh. She hiccoughed. "Oh — hic — Hub! You're—marvelous!"

He said, "Ain't you got any sense? You're goin' to get hurt!"

"Who's goin' to — hic — hurt me?"

He looked as if he were, but she was never less scared in her life. "Peppermin't not going to," she said.

She was in front the rest of the way, and there was no more shooting.

But Peppermint was not exactly glad to see them. "What in hell are *you* buttin' in for?" His snarl included them both.

"If we hadn't, you'd have been dead right now!" said Janie.

"The hell I would! *They'd* of been eatin' up the dirt out there, like them other two!"

"Of all the damn fools I ever saw—!" muttered Hub. "You think you can fight off all the men they can bring in here? What did you go runnin' off for,

in the first place—if you didn't shoot the preacher?"

"You think I shot him, don't you?"

"It sure looks that way."

"There you are! My own brother thinks I shot him. And you want to know why I run off!" He turned on Janie, his eyes furious. "You think I killed him don't you?"

"No," Janie was surprised at her own calmness, and her own unshaken belief. "I'm sure you didn't. Besides, he isn't dead. He was shot in the back, but Doc Everlitt thinks he'll live."

IT SEEMED to calm him a little. "Not dead? And you don't think that I—If anybody else would believe that—"

"We'll prove it!" Janie said. "Everybody will have to believe it!"

"How'll we prove it?"

"You were at the wagonyard when he was shot. I'll swear to that. And so will Hub."

He looked at her with fierce intentness. "You will?"

"Of course I will!"

He shot a quick glance at Hub. "Will you?"

"You know damn well I will!" Hub said, irritably. "We'll get you out of it, if there's any chance." He stepped outside the door and waved for the sheriff to come on.

"Wait a minute!" howled Peppermint. "I didn't say I'd give up!"

"Would you rather we'd go back and tell 'em to come and get you?"

Peppermint said nothing. The sheriff was approaching alone. He rode up to the door, but did not dismount. "Is he ready to give up?"

"Yes," said Hub.

"Tell him to come out."

Peppermint stood back in the cabin, still holding his gun. Janie touched his arm, and urged him toward the door, but he still stood back. "If I give myself up," he muttered, "and they hang me—"

Janie felt a spasmodic tightening of her throat. Suppose they did!

"—it'll be all *your* fault!" Peppermint said. With which he changed from a trapped desperado into a bad boy, fearing punishment for some prank.

Janie gulped in great relief. "Come on, Peppermint!" she said firmly, and took the gun from his hand. It didn't surprise her that he gave it up, or that she led him so easily out of doors.

But it did seem to surprise the sheriff. "You sure he ain't got no other gun on him?"

Hub looked uncertain, but Janie was sure. She knew Peppermint was giving himself up because she had asked him to. He had placed himself in her hands, believing in her, trusting her, and holding her responsible for what happened to him.

She accepted that responsibility, knowing full well what it meant. All the blame would be hers ,if he were convicted . . .

The trial came swiftly, even in a day when Justice was expected to swoop from the sky like an eagle on its prey. Judge Floriday was planning a deer-hunting trip, and he decided to get this case over with first. He named Fred Northbottom, a broken down politician, defense counsel and gave him till eight o'clock the next morning to prepare his case.

By noon the jury had been selected and a large part of the evidence was in. Sheriff Highstar testified that Peppermint, upon being released, had asked where Pastor Pete lived. He told how Peppermint had later resisted arrest, and had finally been trapped, after shooting and wounding two men. The pastor's wife was there to tell of Peppermint's angry demand for money, and a deposition was read from Pastor Pete,

repeating his conversation with Peppermint.

In the afternoon Cutter took the stand. He said Peppermint had told him the "damned preacher" had his money and he was going to get it as soon as he got out of jail.

Cutter was the most damaging witness against Peppermint, and the most imposing figure in the little courtroom. The crowd was small, since there had not been time for news of it to get about the country. Not more than a score of townspeople were there, aside from the jurors.

Judge Floriday sat impatiently fingering his gavel, ready to cut short any legal bickering. Peppermint and his lawyer were at one end of a long desk, and the county attorney at the other end. The sheriff sat behind Peppermint, keeping a close watch on him.

With Hub beside her, Janie watched the proceedings with mounting dismay. She felt so utterly helpless and cut off from Peppermint. Although he was only a few feet away, and separated from her only by a low railing that she could have jumped over without half trying, it seemed to her that he was completely out of her reach. She dared not speak to him, she could not say a word in his defense as all this damaging evidence piled up against him.

She was somewhat encouraged by Northbottom's first question as he started cross-examination of Cutter. "Where were you, Mr. Cutter, when you had this conversation with the defendant?"

"I was in a cell across from the defendant," said Cutter.

"You were in jail, then?"

CUTTER seemed slightly nettled. He glanced at the county attorney, who popped to his feet. "Your Honor, I object!"

"Objection sustained," said the Judge. "Get on with the cross-examination, Mr. Northbottom."

"You were in jail on a murder charge filed against you by Pastor Pete, were you not, Mr. Cutter?" said Northbottom.

Again there was an objection, it was sustained, and the defense counsel went on.

"When the defendant told you he was going to see Pastor Pete about the money as soon as he got out of jail, you called the sheriff and had the defendant released, didn't you, Mr. Cutter?"

Cutter glared at him, and the county attorney shouted, "I object to this line of questioning!"

The Judge frowned at Northbottom. "What do you intend to establish by such questions?"

Northbottom said slowly and distinctly, "I intend to establish the fact that Mr. Cutter had a very good reason for wanting Pastor Pete out of the way."

"I don't see as that has any bearing on the case," His Honor ruled abruptly, "even if you could prove it. Call your next witness."

"That's all. The state rests."

For the next thirty minutes Peppermint sat in the witness chair, telling of his visit to the pastor's home, of leaving and of hearing the shot, of his reason for resisting arrest and running away.

He sweated and he squirmed, and Janie watched him in despair. She knew he was undergoing more tortures than he had in facing certain death at the hands of the posse. In her heart, she knew what the verdict was going to be—long before the jury filed back into the box late that afternoon, and the Judge said, "Gentleman, have you reached a verdict?"

The gentlemen had, without a doubt. It was written all over their faces.

"We find the defendant guilty as charged," read the Judge.

There was no formality and no delay about the passing of sentence, either. The Judge ordered the defendant to stand, and asked: "Have you anything to say before sentence is pronounced?"

He waited but an instant. Peppermint said nothing.

Janie could restrain herself no longer. They wouldn't let her testify. They wouldn't let her lie, to try to save him. But he wasn't guilty!

She jumped up, crying. "Judge! You're making an awful mistake. He didn't do it!"

Startled faces turned toward her. The Judge pounded on his desk. "Shut up, Janie!" he said. "You don't know anything about this."

"But—I do! I know he didn't do it!"

"How do you know?"

"Because he was—he was with me when it happened. He was at the wagonyard, with me."

The Judge scowled. "Janie, that would be perjury, if you were on the witness stand. You know the penalty for perjury?"

"I don't care!"

Janie didn't know what happened then, till it was over with. She saw Peppermint leaping the railing, and then she heard the sheriff's gun. Peppermint fell, only a few steps away.

As soon as she could move, she ran to him. But the sheriff was there first, and they held her back.

But they couldn't hold Hub back. He knocked somebody down. And then he was surrounded, and it seemed that everybody in the room was in that fight but her, and she wanted to be in it. But she was shunted aside and couldn't even see what was happening.

Janie wished for a gun or a club or something. She didn't blame Peppermint for trying to escape, for knocking the sheriff out, for shooting the possemen. If she had been in his place, she would have done the same thing. She knew that now. She knew she had been wrong in persuading him to give up.

SHE blamed herself for everything. And it didn't help much when it turned out later that Peppermint had been shot through both legs, but was not critically hurt. It didn't help at all when he was sentenced to life imprisonment and when in spite of his wounds, they started with him to the penitentiary. They had him in a spring wagon, one that Cutter sometimes used for hauling corpses.

"It's better to take him, now," the sheriff said. "He won't be tryin' to get away."

Janie didn't have a word with him alone. In his eyes was an awful accusation. Accusing her. She would never forget it.

Hub was on hand to try to comfort her. As if anybody or anything could ever comfort her again.

It soon became evident to Hub that Janie's punishment would be worse than Peppermint's. Janie's was self-inflicted. He knew that she would always blame herself for what happened, unless he could make her see things straight.

He stayed with her that evening, although he realized she didn't want him. He also realized that he was in a tough spot himself. Peppermint was gone now, gone for good—unless he managed to escape. Hub knew that Peppermint would never give up trying to escape, and that he might sometime.

If Peppermint had chosen to go away of his own will, if he had eluded the posse, Hub thought he might have stood a chance with Janie. But not now. He knew Janie would be quick to resent any attempt on his part to win her over, as taking unfair advantage of the tragic injustice that had befallen Peppermint.

The next day he went back to camp,

went back to his wild horses, went back to a new and bitter loneliness.

His longing for Peppermint might have been a little sharper as he thought of the job ahead of him—breaking a hundred broom-tails by himself.

First he had to get them to the pasture, along with a half dozen mares belonging to the Two Lazy-Two, and some other branded stuff.

He took them a few at a time, tying on their front legs wooden clogs which dangled at their knees to keep them from running too fast. Some of them he side-lined, fastening a pole from right front leg to right rear leg, and some he tied to gentle horses.

The pasture was one used for feeding Two Lazy-Two stock during the winter. There was four large stacks of hay, recently put up, and fenced off in one corner. The fence had to be good all around the pasture, to keep other hungry stock out. A cabin, which was used only in winter was furnished with bunks and stove and a few cans of emergency grub.

The bunk looked good to Hub. He hadn't been able to lie down on the ground and sleep very well since his experience with the snake. When he closed his eyes he could still see it, and when he heard anything that sounded like a rattler he broke out in a sweat. Snakes crawled through his dreams, frequently wearing big black hats and long-tailed coats.

Wherever he walked, wherever he rode, he looked for snakes. He carried his gun all the time, and tried to kill his fear by killing snakes. But his fear mocked him, assuming both human and reptilian form and he knew that he couldn't get rid of it if he killed all of the snakes in the world.

But if he could catch it in human form, if he could kill it then—

He tried to work off his obcession. He roped and tied and saddled broncs in the small pole corral. Sometimes he rode them there, sometimes when they wanted to run, he let them out in the pasture and rode them.

One big roan eluded his rope, day after day, until he was the only one left that hadn't been ridden. Finally, Hub got his loop over the warily weaving head. And then he lost the rope. The roan tore around the corral. Every time another horse stepped on the rope, he whirled and charged.

Hub knew he didn't dare to pick up the rope. He went after the outlaw with another rope and this time got him by the front feet. Tying that horse was a good two-man job, and when Hub got through he was sweating like two men.

He looked around and saw that he had an audience—four men perched on top of the corral. One of them was Rye, foreman of the Two Lazy-Two. The others he didn't know.

Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he walked over to them, nodding to Rye. "That one give me quite a rassel," he said.

"Yeah," said Rye. "We been watchin' you."

HUB said, "You ain't lookin' for a job, are you?"

"Nope."

They were acting strangely. Hub wondered what kind of bad news was coming now. He waited.

"You figurin' on sellin' all these horses?" Rye asked.

"Sure."

They kept watching him queerly. "I see you've got some Two Lazy-Two mares out there."

Hub nodded. "Yeah, I got half a dozen for you."

Rye had an unpleasant smile, which showed the absence of three upper teeth. "For me?"

"Why, of course."

A round-faced, double-chinned man spoke, dryly. "I see you've got some Flyin' A mares out there, too. Did you get 'em for me?"

Hub was puzzled. "Why—I got 'em for whoever they belong to."

"How about that big bay branded with a Cross L?" asked a lean, bearded man. "Who'd you get him for?"

Hub stared from from one to the other. "What's goin' on?"

Rye said, "That's what we want to know?"

It had not been more than three weeks since Hub had made arrangements with Rye for use of the pasture. "You act like you never seen me before," Hub said.

"Have I?" Rye returned coolly.

Hub was astounded. "You don't remember me?"

"Can't say that I do."

Hub knew that Rye remembered him quite well. "I don't get it," he said.

"I think I do," Rye said. "How about it, boys?"

There were nods of agreement from the others. Hub saw the rope coming, but he was still too much astonished to realize what it meant. The loop settled about his shoulders and snapped taut. "What—in—?" he yelped.

Two of them jumped from the fence and seized him. He butted one of them down, and kicked the other. But they were all over him now, the four of them. They tied his hands and his feet, and dragged him out of the corral to a live oak tree.

There was no doubt about their intentions by this time, but Hub's mind refused the evidence of his eyes and the rest of his body. It was all so unexpected, so fantastic. Five minutes ago he had been struggling with the big roan horse, his only thought of personal danger a queer obsession about snakes. He had done nothing to bring about anybody's enmity. He simply could not believe they intended to hang him. Maybe it was all a joke!

"You got anythin to say for yourself?" asked the fat man, as Rye drew the rope over a limb of the tree.

They were not playing jokes.

"I don't know what to say!" Hub wheezed. "I don't know what you're doin' this for!"

"You haven't got much time to talk," said the fat man. "Don't waste it like that."

"You think I was stealin' your horses?"

"No, we don't *think* anything about it. There's our horses."

"But I caught 'em for you! I was goin' to tell you I had 'em!"

The fat man smiled, rather sadly. He didn't seem to relish this job, but there was no indication he intended to shirk it. "Is that all you have to say?"

"It's the God's truth!"

A pudgy hand was lifted. "All right, Rye. Let's get it over with."

As the rope bit into his neck, Hub thought he could hear the jeering words of Peppermint, asking him where he got all of his smart schemes. Yes, this had been his scheme, and his alone. Although Peppermint had proposed a lot of schemes, many of them dishonest and dangerous, it had been Hub's scheme, harmless and well-intentioned, that had put a noose around his neck.

HE HAD done this extra work, over Peppermint's protests, he had even branded some of the colts—

"Hey!" The rope was strangling him. He could barely make himself heard. "Wait! Listen to me—!"

Rye was not going to listen. The fat man, however, commanded, "Wait!"

The rope loosened a bit. Hub got a rasping breath. "I can *prove* I didn't steal your horses!"

"All right," said the fat man. "Prove it."

"Look at them colts—the ones follerin' them Two Lazy-Two mares—I branded 'em!"

This seemed to make an impression on him. "What brand did you put on 'em?"

"The same that's on their mothers—the Two Lazy-Two!"

The fat man looked at Rye. "I didn't notice that, did you?"

"He's just stallin'," growled Rye.

"Maybe we'd better have a look."

They took a look and they saw, of course, that Hub was telling the truth. Anybody could see that the colts had been freshly branded Two Lazy-Two. It proved beyond question that Hub had no intention of stealing them.

"He probably done that, just in case he got caught!" Rye declared.

The others did not agree with him, neither were they entirely convinced.

"I'm in favor of turnin' him loose," said the fat man, "if he'll promise to get out of the country."

Hub was foolish enough to give them an argument. "Why the hell should I get out of the country?"

"To keep from gettin' yourself hung," said the fat man. "You may be honest and you may be a thief. We just don't like wild horse trappers in this country. It's too easy to trap the tame ones."

Hub's resentment against this high-handed decree was born of the thought of leaving Janie. "You can't do this to me!" he shouted. "I'll—"

The rope pinched off his words. "Can't we?" said Rye.

"You dirty, double-crossin'—"

Again he was strangled, and again he fought for breath.

"Cutter won't like it if we turn him loose," said Rye.

The mention of Cutter's name explained many things to Hub. He saw that Cutter was behind all of this. But the fat man seemed to be in authority.

"We'll turn him loose on one condition—that he promise to get out and stay out," said the fat man.

There was no doubt that he meant business, and he seemed to be trying to be fair, within the limits of his prejudice and experience with horse thieves.

"All right," Hub agreed morosely. "I'll get out."

They cut the ropes. He flexed his hands and longed to get them around Rye's throat.

"Get goin' now!" the fat man ordered.

They waited for him to get his outfit together. "What about them horses?" he said. "They're mine."

This brought on an argument between them but they finally decided to let him take all the broncs he had tamed. He rounded up nearly fifty, along with his own and Peppermint's string, and started them out.

He saw that he was being followed, and he had his hands full trying to herd fifty shave-tails. But he had no intention of going off without seeing Janie, if he had to turn all the horses loose and defy a dozen lynching mobs.

He drove through the hills to the west, taking a course which brought him nearer Quailtown. A little before sundown he came to a small lake, where he let the horses drink, and considered what he was to do with them for the night.

"Zzzzzz!"

That warning rattle put his horse into a stiff-legged jump, and he got back in his saddle, and shot three times before he hit the snake in the head.

Then came a rattle of another kind which told him how foolish he had been firing his gun. It was the rattle of hoofs as some of the horses swirled away from the little lake. Others joined in, and soon the whole bunch was on the run.

He managed to head them and turn

them back, but they broke up into smaller bunches, with the mares following their one-time leaders, racing away in different directions.

Hub cursed the snake—the one he had just shot, and then the one he couldn't forget: the one that had crawled into bed with him. He cursed the one that wore a long black coat.

SNAKES! Everywhere. Snake eyes, watching him, daring him to make a false move.

With this obsession filling him now, driving him crazy, he knew there was only one way to get rid of it. Fear was at the bottom of it, and he had never before known fear. He couldn't live with it. He couldn't kill all the snakes in the world, but he could kill the man with the eyes of a snake, the man who had made this fear an unbearable thing, the man who was the cause of all his trouble.

Or could he? As he rode toward Quailtown, doubts began crowding in on him. The humiliation of the first encounter with Cutter had never left him, and now it arose stronger than ever.

This was no ordinary man he had set out to kill. This was a strange Power that not only had overwhelmed him but also an entire community. He had not been alone in his fear as long as he did nothing about it—but now that he had started out to destroy it, he was alone.

Instead of killing his fear, he saw that he would have to conquer it first. If he didn't, he might as well turn his gun on himself. With the cold sweat breaking out on him, with his hand shaking, with his thoughts in a crazy whirl, he would be an easy victim in a gun fight.

But why should there be a gun fight? Why not seek this critter out and kill it as he would a snake? Give it no chance to strike. Simply knock its head off.

Why not? The answer was deep inside him. It was the core of him. It was the twenty-four years that he had lived, and it was something with which he had been born. In those twenty-four years there had been a lot of struggle, just to keep alive. He had matched his strength and his wits against other men, with his life at stake. But he had never taken unfair advantage of any man. He could not do it.

Call it a "code," a "philosophy," a "religion," or any fancy name you like. This didn't explain it, or make it easier to understand. A man had it, or he didn't have. Hub had it. Peppermint didn't have it. Probably neither of them could do anything about it. Without a doubt it put Hub under a handicap in times like these, as it had in his many fights with Peppermint.

Tonight, Hub wished he were more like Peppermint. He knew what Peppermint would do, if he were starting out to kill a man. He would find him, catch him off guard, and shoot him down. He would have no qualms of conscious. And he would have no trembling hands, no icy trickles of sweat. Peppermint was not afraid of any man in the world. He was not afraid of snakes. He was not afraid of anything.

It was too bad that he was in the penitentiary.

Another thing Peppermint would do, if the situation were reversed: He would be courting Janie. If his rival were taken off to the pen, Peppermint would consider it a golden opportunity for him. He would see nothing underhanded about that, and this very lack of conscience, or boldness, or whatever it was, would enable him to win her.

But Hub couldn't do that. He was afraid Janie would think he wasn't playing fair. Was this a sense of fair play—or was it also a fear?

Hang it, he was afraid of her, too! He wasn't holding back because he wanted to be fair with Peppermint, but because he was afraid he would ruin

his chances with Janie! He wanted her bad enough to double-cross his own grandmother.

He particularly wanted to see her before he faced Cutter. He needed to see her. He needed the steadiness and the hope she gave him. He needed to be restored to a sane condition, and only she could do that to him.

And if she didn't, this time, he still wanted to see her. It would very likely be the last time.

He found a lantern hanging above the gate at the wagonyard but the store was in darkness. He went around to the side and saw a light in her room.

At his knock, she called, "Ernest?"

"It's me—Hub."

THE thump of Ernest's peg leg coming from the barn showed that he was right on the job. "Back here!" he called, "If you want to put up for the night."

Then the door opened and Janie, dressed in a pink sort of robe with her hair hanging down, was standing before him in pleased surprise. "Hub! My goodness! I thought you'd left the country, or something!"

"No, I—I've just been workin'."

The hired man hobbled up. "Oh—it's you! Glad to see you." He put out his hand.

Hub was beginning to feel better already. He shook hands with Ernest and Janie said, "Come on in! Are you hungry? Of course you are. I'll fix some ham and eggs."

Ham and eggs meant a celebration, a day in town, a rest and a talk with other people. Next to Janie he needed most of all a plate of ham and eggs.

After he had eaten, he felt a good deal more like going out and killing a man. He was beginning to feel almost cheerful over the prospect.

Janie said, "You're thinking about Peppermint, aren't you?"

He was startled. "Peppermint?"

Her eyes widened and then narrowed, as if they were taking two entirely different views of him. "Yes, your brother. Remember him? I see now, you wasn't worryin' about him."

It was time to be honest with her. His only chance was to tell her all about himself, and it wasn't easy to do because he wasn't used to talking about himself and what he had to say didn't sound so good.

"No, I wasn't worryin' about Peppermint," he began slowly. "He's my brother and I reckon I ought to be worryin' about him, but I'm not. I was lonesome for him, back in camp, but that was just because I'd been with him so long. He was goin' to leave me, anyway, he said. We never got along together.

Janie picked up his plate and put it in the dish pan. "And yet you lived together all your lives. I wonder why?"

"I've wondered that myself a lot of times."

She poured some water from the teakettle into the dish pan. "I've never had any brothers, or sisters," she said. "but there's a saying, you know, blood is thicker than water. I guess that's it."

"I guess so." He was getting lost again, and uneasy. He blurted, "The only reason I come to town with you that day and tried to help him was because you wanted me to."

She stopped, looked at him, then went on washing the dishes.

"I'm—I'm tryin' to tell you everything," he said, desperately, "just how I feel—about him, and you, and everything. I want you to know tonight, before I—"

She turned as he paused. "Before you what?"

"I'm goin' to kill Cutter."

She put her hands on the table behind her, stiffening her arms as if to brace herself. "That won't do any good—even

if you could!"

"I think it will," he said.

"But how? That won't prove he framed Peppermint, and that he shot Pastor Pete, himself!"

Here was temptation in another guise. Why not let her think this was the reason he was going to kill Cutter?

The answer came up again, simple and inescapable: Because he wanted her to know the truth. "I'm going to kill Cutter because I'm afraid of him," he said.

"You—what?"

"He's got eyes like a snake. I'm afraid of him. He's the only man I was ever afraid of. That's the reason I'm going to kill him."

She stared. "Why, Hub! You sound crazy!"

"I reckon I am. I've been a little crazy ever since I woke up with that snake on me, and then seein' you didn't help me any."

"What?"

Of course, that wasn't what he meant to say. "I mean—you made me crazy in another way. I'm crazy about you. You know it, don't you?" He walked toward her. If he couldn't make her see anything else, he must make her see this!

She said, "I—I know it."

"And you're crazy about Peppermint, ain't you?" he said savagely.

She only moistened her lips.

"And he's in the penitentiary, and he don't give a damn about you—more'n he does about any purty girl! And there's nothin' I can do about it. *That's* what makes me crazy!"

HER eyes were wide and steady. "But—what's that got to do with your trying to kill Cutter?"

He was confused, momentarily. What did Cutter have to do with this? He remembered, "I'm afraid of him. I'd rather die than be afraid of any man."

Here it was. After all of his confusion, and his indecision and desperate effort to show her the truth, he had found it for himself. It was simply that he would rather die than be afraid of any man.

She didn't speak for a time. And when she did it was with a sadness and a kind of admiration. "I can see that you would. You couldn't go on being afraid of anybody. You'd be miserable all your life. I don't think you're doing right—not according to what Pastor Pete says is right. But I think you're doing what you've got to do."

Here was complete understanding. Here was what he had come for, and the biggest part of his task seemed to be finished. Now he could go on with complete confidence in himself.

She stepped closer, pulled his head down and kissed him warmly. It was a kiss that tantalized and excited him. It was a kiss that promised him nothing, but made him hope for a lot.

It said, "I wish you wouldn't go, but I know I can't stop you."

It said, "You are the brother of the man I love. I wish you luck."

He couldn't take advantage of a kiss like that. Hub couldn't. All he could do was straighten up, take a good long look at her, put on his hat, and walk out of there—feeling as if he could kill a thousand men like Cutter. He didn't feel bloodthirsty. He just had a job to do, a job he had thought was going to be impossible, but now he saw it was going to be easy . . .

Cutter was happily preparing a corpse for burial. He whistled softly as he worked. Business was very good these days. Lots of people dying. Most everybody that got sick, Doc Everlitt operated on them. That made business fine.

There was just one fly in the embalming fluid. That was Pastor Pete. He as getting well fast. And after a forty-

five slug had gone right through him, too. Who else could have lived over that but a little meddlesome sky pilot?

Of course, the preacher had refused to let Doc Everlitt wait on him, and that no doubt was the reason he had pulled through. It seemed that he knew a good deal about medicine himself. He know a good deal about everything—too much. He would have to be disposed of, somehow. The trouble would be getting another chance to throw it on somebody else.

Cutter paused as he heard steps out front.

Although it was long past closing time, he remembered that he had not locked the front door. So when the visitor rattled the door, Cutter called for him to come in.

He was surprised to see Rye. "Well? What's wrong?" he asked as the foreman came diffidently into the room, saw the corpse, and turned slightly pale.

It amused Cutter to see the fear so many husky, hell-for-leather characters showed toward dead people after they had been "laid out" and thus invested with dignity and the mystery of death. "Didn't you get him?" he asked sharply.

"Well—yes, in a way—"

"In what way?"

"Well—we didn't hang him."

"How did you kill him?"

"We didn't kill him."

Cutter carefully rolled down his sleeve. He thumbed a light tattoo upon the starched cuff. "Why didn't you?"

"He kind of out-foxed us. I done just what you told me to, I got Barrel Brown and Sid Lassen and Whitey Ross, and told 'em this wild horse trapper was tryin' to get off with some of their stuff. I took 'em out to the pasture, and they saw their horses. They was ready to hang this trapper, I even had the rope around his neck, when he proves he didn't intend to steal their horses."

AS CUTTER listened to Rye's explanation, he adjusted his suspenders and the narrow leather belt to which was attached a short holster with the barrel of a forty-five nosing through it. He put on his coat. He could think better with his coat on. It gave him more poise, more assurance in his mystical powers.

"He's smarter than I thought—or luckier," he said. "He may be dumb enough not to leave the country, though."

There was a soft step at the curtained doorway, and Hub appeared. He said, "You're right, Cutter."

Cutter was as motionless as his corpse. Rye backed into the little room slowly.

"He's pretty dumb," Hub said. "If he was smart, he would have come in here shootin', seein' as there's two of you. But he's goin' to give you a chance to pull your guns. Both of you."

They didn't do it.

"That's purty dumb, ain't it?" Hub went on. "Lettin' you both in on this at the same time? I can't get only one of you at a time. I just got one gun. See?"

Still Cutter made no move. Rye was still backing away. He acted very much as if he wished he were somewhere else.

"Don't you want in on this, Rye?" Hub asked. "You double-crossin' bastard. I didn't know you worked for Cutter, till just now. I heard what you said. Clears everything up for me. That's the way I like it, nice and clear."

And that's the way it was. His mind was clear. His hand was steady. He looked into Cutter's eyes and didn't feel the slightest fear.

"Of course, if you don't want in on this, Rye, you can watch me shoot him—just in case there's any question about it with the Law. You want to be a witness for me, Rye—or you want to be a corpse?"

Rye didn't want to be a corpse. That was evident.

"All right. Then stay right where you're at. Maybe you better get your hands up, and get a little further over in that corner, where you won't get hit—"

He was playing Cutter as he had played many wild horses. Giving him a little rope, making him think that maybe he could get away.

"You know, of course, that I am unarmed," Cutter said.

"I know, of course, that you're a damned liar. You got a gun under that coat."

"And you expect me to get hold of my gun, under my coat, by the time you draw yours?"

"Not quite, brother, not quite."

After all, was this entirely fair? Could a man reach a gun under his coat as quickly as he could draw from an exposed holster?

No, he couldn't. It wouldn't be fair. And Hub had to be fair about this thing, absolutely fair. He could imagine what Peppermint would do in a case of this kind. He could hear Peppermint's raucous horse-laugh. Peppermint had said: "Somebody's goin' to kill you sometime, just because you give him an 'even break'. You damn fool! Givin' a man an even break who's tryin' to kill you!"

That's what Peppermint had said. Of course Peppermint was in the penitentiary now . . .

"Take off your coat," Hub said.

Cutter's teeth gleamed briefly. "Is this a fist fight?"

"No, this is a pistol fight. A fair pistol fight. And I got a witness."

Cutter bowed slightly, all very polite, like a man who feels honored to fight a fair pistol fight. He made a motion as if to remove his coat.

Had Hub known him a little better he would have known he wouldn't take off his coat. That would have been undignified. Some men preferred to die with their boots on, but Cutter preferred to die with his coat on—if he had to die.

Of course, he preferred not to die at all. And so, as his fingers touched the edge of his coat, his hand was only inches from his gun.

He didn't pull the gun. He simply turned it toward Hub and fired through the bob-tailed holster.

Thus he got in the first shot.

But it was wasted on a man already dead. It plouged into the corpse, over which he was shooting.

Hub swayed away from Cutter's second slug, and blasted him backward. From the corner of his eye, Hub saw that Rye was still standing with his hands up. Rye was giong to make a damn good witness. And Cutter was going to make a damn good corpse.

ACTUALLY, the way he fell, writhing and turning until was on his back, straightening out his legs, stiffening himself all over, it looked as though this were his final professional act—laying himself out. It was just too bad, Hub thought, that Cutter couldn't see how nice he looked, and sell himself a coffin . . .

It was spring, and calf branding was over, and Hub was caught up with his work. He figured he could loaf for a month.

"I wish you wouldn't call it 'loafing'," Janie reprimanded. It's going to be our honeymoon."

But Hub couldn't bring himself to say "honeymoon." There was still a lot of wild-horse in Hub, in spite of the fact that he had given up horse-trapping forever, and that for three years he had been running a little cow outfit of his own, and that he was planning to get married.

He had changed a lot in three years. but he still sometimes thought wistfully

of the old free, wild days with Peppermint. Not that he longed especially for them. He was happy now for the first time in his life, and real happiness was just beginning.

It had taken him a long time to get where he was tonight—sitting here on his own front porch with Janie, pausing for these last few moments to watch the sun go down, and to watch the rapt look on Janie's face, and marvel at a fact which he still could not quite believe was true: They were going to be married tomorrow.

But something might happen. Tomorrow was still in the future, and a man had no hold on the future. Only what was here and now did he have.

He took her by the hand. He had her now. After all these years, he had her. And he wouldn't let go of her till tomorrow, till Pastor Pete would say, "I pronounce you man and wife."

"You're cold, Hub!" she said. "Why, you're shaking."

"Am I?" He tried to laugh. "Just gettin' scared, I guess."

"You goin' to back out, now?"

He crushed her hand. "I've been waitin' so long—it's *still* so long—"

She kissed him quickly and stood up. "There!" she said. "The sun is down. It's time to go. We don't want to miss the train."

He was on his feet instantly. "What are we settin' here for, anyhow? We've got a long ways to ride."

She said, "There's someone coming up the road."

Hub looked at the rider resentfully. He was riding fast. A neighbor, wanting something? A stranger, stopping for supper?

He didn't give a damn who it was, or what he wanted—there was no time to be bothered with him now. "Let's go!" he said gruffly.

"Wait a minute—there's something wrong. Look at the way he's riding!"

Something wrong, was there? Not with Hub, there wasn't. Everything was just right, and Hub intended to keep it that way.

The horses were saddled and waiting. He had taken the trunk and the grips to town the day before, so they could have this ride through the moonlight on horseback. There was nothing romantic about a buckboard or a wagon.

"Who is it, Hub?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!"

"But look! It looks like—oh, my God! It couldn't be!"

Hub still had hold of her hand. Now it was icy cold, and the chill of it went through him, froze him.

"It *is* him! It's Peppermint!"

And so it was. Peppermint, riding the life out of a big spotted horse. Peppermint, escaped from the penitentiary. Peppermint, with the Law on his trail.

All of this was easy to see, even before he pulled his wheezing horse to a stop and swung from his saddle.

He walked arrogantly, sullenly—just the way he always acted when he was in trouble. "Surprised to see me, huh,"

BUT Hub was not greatly surprised. For three years he had been expecting something like this, and for the last few weeks—ever since he had persuaded Janie to marry him—he had been dreading it. Hub had known Peppermint would break out sometime, if there was any possible chance.

"Holdin' hands, huh?" Peppermint gave a little laugh, harsh and insinuating. "What's goin' on here, anyhow?"

Hub said steadily, "Janie and me are gettin' married."

This seemed to give him a jolt. "The hell you are," he muttered.

"We're leavin' tonight for Wichita," said Hub.

Janie hadn't said a word. Her face was drawn and pale, and she looked as if he were undergoing intense physical

agony.

"Maybe I come to the wrong place," said Peppermint. "Maybe you ain't willin' to help me."

"Of course we'll help you!" Janie breathed. "What—what happened?"

"I busted out of that hell-hole! I told you I would, didn't I?"

"How?" asked Hub.

"I busted a couple of screws over the head with a shovel. They thought they had me, after that. But I had a gun then."

"Did you kill somebody?" Hub asked.

"Three of 'em. That's all." He was bragging about it. Then there was a change in him. "If they catch me—well, they ain't goin' to catch me. There's just one sheriff on my tail, now. I haven't been able to shake him, so I'm goin' to let him catch up with me, here."

He glanced back. "I think that's him comin' now."

The way Hub felt, the sheriff might have been coming after him. He seemed to be trapped, and he knew it was no use to try to escape. He saw the way Janie was looking at Peppermint—it was the same old, entranced, adoring look she always had for him.

"Well, for goodness sakes!" Janie cried. "Don't just stand there. Come in the house!"

Peppermint grinned down at her. "Sure. Don't worry. I'll take care of this star-toter." He thrust his hand in the side pocket of his jumper and drew out a stick of peppermint candy. "I brought this to you," he said.

She took it, and her eyes were beginning to gleam with tears.

He took out another stick and crunched it in his mouth. "Good, ain't it? Nothin' like peppermint to pep up a man when he's wore out, and still got another job to do. Let's get in the house." He took her by the arm.

"Maybe you can hide!" Janie said. "Maybe you won't have to—oh, why don't we do something with your horse—?"

She swung on Hub. "Why can't you get on his horse and ride on, and let the sheriff see you? Then Peppermint can hide and I'll tell the sheriff he just stopped here a minute and rode on!"

Hub was faced with exactly the same problem he had been when he first saw her. How well he remembered the morning she had ridden into camp, telling him Peppermint was in trouble, confident that he would do everything in his power to help him. Hub had learned his lesson then. And he had never forgotten it.

Since then, of course, he had confessed to her that he had gone with her mostly to make a good impression on her. She knew all about that, now. She knew all about him, and all about Peppermint. And still she was in love with Peppermint.

She knew he had stolen the thousand dollars. The money had been given to the widow, with Janie's consent. And Hub had bought the widow's ranch.

For three years Hub had worked and waited, and all of his accomplishments, all of his hopes and happiness, had been blasted to bits in the last five minutes.

There was no use to pretend he was happy about it. There was no use to try to impress her with his loyalty to his brother—toward whom he felt no loyalty.

And he was a ltitle surprised when he found himself saying, "Sure, I'll go."

What made him say it? He didn't want to go. He didn't want a sheriff chasing him over the country, and likely shooting at him, and he didn't want to leave Peppermint here with Janie.

But Peppermint was his brother. Peppermint was in trouble again—this time it surely meant life or death to

him. So there was only one thing for Hub to do.

He remembered something Janie had said, a long time ago. She had said, in speaking of that other occasion: "Why did you do it? I guess it's because blood is thicker than water."

NOW she was saying, "You'd better take his jumper and hat, so you'll look like him."

Without a word, Hub put on Peppermint's jumper and his small flop hat. And then he climbed on the spotted horse and rode away.

Janie drew Peppermint inside the house. She knew he was going to kiss her, and she knew she couldn't resist him. But she tried to.

"You mustn't do that, Peppermint. Please don't!" And all the time she was trembling with an eagerness she could not conceal. She had never trembled this way in the arms of Hub.

"Why not?" said Peppermint, putting his lips to hers.

She turned her head. "Because—I'm going to marry Hub!"

"Why?"

"Why! — Because — because I love him!" And she *had* thought she was in love with him—till she saw Peppermint again.

"Don't try to tell me that," Peppermint was tightening his arms, crushing her. "You was goin' to marry him because I wasn't around. Ain't that it?"

She couldn't say "No" after that. She couldn't control the wild joy that surged through her.

"Well, I'm here now!" said Peppermind. "Right here!"

But there was something else—some other reason why they shouldn't—the sheriff! Was he coming? Was he following Hub?

She turned to the window. "Look! He sees Hub! He's going after him—no, he isn't—he's just looking—why don't you chase him, you fool?"

"Because he ain't a fool. Not if he's Sheriff Chilao," Peppermint said. "I didn't think he'd fall for that. Now, I'll have to kill him."

"No you won't! You hide. I'll talk to him."

"Won't do no good to hide. Won't do no good for you to talk to him."

"But it will! Go back into that bedroom. Get under the bed.

Peppermint laughed. "Now who's talkin' silly? Me crawlin' under a bed!"

"Please! Please! Go back there anyway. Let me talk to him."

Peppermint considered. "I'll let you talk to him. But if he comes in the house, the talkin' is all over."

He stood just inside the bedroom, with the door swung back for concealment. From here he could shoot into the living room without showing himself. Hhis was the way he liked it. He reached for a piece of peppermint, which reminded him that he had changed clothes with Hub and had forgotten the candy. He swore. He needed something to moisten his mouth and throat. He could hardly swallow.

Now he could here footsteps on the flagstones. Then Janie's well controlled, questioning "How do you do?"

Sheriff Chilao had a friendly, disarming voice. He made people feel that it was an honor to be locked up in his jail. "My, you've got a purty place here," he said.

"I—don't live here," said Janie. "I'm just a neighbor."

"Folks that live here are mighty lucky to have neighbors like that."

Janie laughed nervously. "Were you —wanting to see somebody?"

"Yes. I wanted to see Peppermint Beeson."

"Who?"

"The fellow that rode up here a little while ago."

"Oh! Well, he—left. Didn't you see him?"

"I seen somebody ridin' off. I didn't know it was him."

"Oh, but it was! He hasn't been gone very long. You could probably catch him. He went that way."

"Sure enough, now! I wonder why he was in such a hurry to get away? Did he see me comin'?"

"I don't know."

THERE was quite a long silence, and Peppermint was getting jittery. It wouldn't have been so bad if he'd had something to chew on. Why the hell had he been in such a hurry changing clothes?

"Peppermint a friend of yours?" asked the sheriff.

"Oh no; I never saw him before. He just stopped to—water his horse."

"That's funny. Plenty of water down in the creek."

"Well—I think he intended to stay for supper. But when he saw you coming, he left."

"Uh, huh. Don't blame him much. Well, maybe I better be gettin' along. Maybe I can catch up with him before dark."

"Yes, I think you can, if you hurry."

From the sound the sheriff made in leaving, he was in no big hurry. Peppermint was pretty sure they hadn't fooled him much. But the sheriff was riding away, and there had been no shooting, and everything was working out fine. Too good.

Janie looked as if she were about to collapse, and this time she made no resistance when Peppermint put his arms around her.

"What are we going to do now, Peppermint?" she asked helplessly.

"First," said Peppermint, "we're goin' to do some kissin'."

They did.

"That's what I come here for," he said. "Janie, were goin' to get married!"

"But—but I was going to marry Hub!"

"You *was* goin' to marry him. But you're not now!"

He kissed her again and she said, "No, I guess I'm not. Oh, Peppermint! It's always been this way! I don't know what I'm doing when you're around. I waited for you and waited for you, and when you didn't come—"

"But I did come. Here I am."

"Yes, you came—with the sheriff after you. Peppermint, you're no good. Most likely you never will be. But I love you. And I'll marry you. I'll go with you, wherever you have to go. And if you get caught, if they send you to the penitentiary, I'll wait—just the way I've been waiting. Oh, why am I such a fool?"

"Because you love me, honey."

Yes, everything was working out fine. Too good. Peppermint was expecting something bad to happen—like the sheriff coming back unexpectedly. And he did.

Shortly after dark, they heard him coming. Peppermint faded back into the darkness of the bedroom, and Janie went to the door.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, ma'am," the sheriff said. "But I caught up with Peppermint."

Peppermint could hear Janie suck in her breath. "You c-caught up with him?"

It was too bad, just too bad for the sheriff. Peppermint didn't want to kill him, but of course he would have to, now.

"Where—is he?" Janie asked, a sudden chill in her voice.

"He's out there. Tied to his saddle. I had to shoot him."

Peppermint's mouth had been steadily drying out, as it always did when he was nervous and had no pep-

permint to chew on, and now it was parched and burning. His whole body was shriveling up, drying out.

"You mean he's—dead?" Janie said. "Oh, my Heavenly Father!"

"Easy now," said the sheriff. "I thought you didn't know him."

After a long pause, Janie said, "I don't. Why did you come to tell me about it?"

"I just thought you might want to know. And, besides, I'd like to get a bite to eat. I've got a long ride ahead of me. I'm goin' to take him to Beene Junction tonight. I think there's a train goin' south about midnight. I want to catch it if I can."

Peppermint had recovered from his shock, enough to suspect trickery. This might be only a gag of the sheriff's to get into the house and look around.

"Won't—won't you come in?" asked Jannie.

Peppermint stood with his gun ready, but the sheriff showed no interest in the darkened room. He went to the kitchen with Janie and stayed there till she fixed him something to eat. Peppermint heard Janie slip out the side door and he knew she had gone to look for Hub.

PRESENTLY she was back and the sheriff was saying, "I'm sure much obliged to you, ma'am. I'll be gettin' along now."

"What—what are you going to with —the body?"

"Oh, I'll ship it back to the penitentiary."

After the sheriff had gone, Peppermint took no chances in showing himself. He waited for Janie to come to him. She crept into the room whispering, "Didn't you hear? He killed Hub!"

"You sure?"

"I went out there. I saw him. Tied to the saddle, just like he said. Your brother, Peppermint. He died for you."

Peppermint licked his lips, and it was like touching his tongue to a hot iron. "You got any peppermint candy in the house?"

"Any—what?"

"Anything to chew on!" he said savagely.

She backed away. "Do you hear what I'm telling you? Hub is dead! Your brother—"

"Hell, yes, I know it. I can't help it, can I? I didn't kill him. It was your idea, you know."

She kept backing away.

"What in hell you acting that way for?" he growled. "*I* didn't kill him!"

"No," she whispered. "No, you didn't kill him. I did.'

"No you didn't. There's nothin' we can do about it now. We might as well make the best of it."

"Will you tell me how in heaven we can make the best of it?"

"Just wait. Let the sheriff take him back to the pen. The sheriff thinks he's me. All right. Let him think it. Let him bury me. Understand?"

There was still no understanding in her terrified stare. "No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Don't be so dumb! If they bury him, thinkin' he's me, then they won't be after me any more. I can go whereever I want to, and they won't be after me."

She said nothing, and he went on, fired with a new hope. "We can take that train to Wichita tonight. Folks around here will think you went off with Hub, just like you was goin' to. We can write back to 'em that we are takin' a long trip. And we will! Don't you see, honey? It's goin' to work out all right, after all!"

Presently she said, "I don't think it will, Peppermint. I don't think it will work out at all."

"Why won't it?"

"Because I won't go with you, Pep-

permint. I didn't really know what kind of man you were. Now I know."

"Wha'd you mean?" he snarled. "What's wrong with—just makin' the best of things?"

She made a sound that was something like a laugh, but he'd never heard a laugh quite like it. "You're just a little to practical for me, Peppermint, that's all. I am more the—romantic type. In other words, I'm a fool! Go on, Peppermint. Catch the train to Wichita. Let them bury your brother as an outlaw, for the crimes you committed. If you can live with yourself, after that, go on. I couldn't live with you, I'm sure."

He tried not to understand, but he did. Still he was not so much ashamed as alarmed. If she didn't go with him, there would be no elopement to explain Hub's absence. Then, too, she would probably tell everybody all about it. She would *have* to go!

"You and me are catchin' the train for Wichita tonight," he said.

Since the nearest house was five miles away, Janie had little choice in the matter. She didn't seem scared, nor even hostile. She went silently and stoically. She was like a stranger, aloof, and hard-eyed now.

They were about a mile from Beene Junction when the southbound train went through, stopping long enough to pick up, say, one passenger and a corpse. Peppermint watched it out of sight, screaming through the night, and knew that he was very lucky not to be in that baggage car. His luck would have to hold for awhile yet. Janie might give him some trouble yet.

HE MADE her wait some distance from the depot at the edge of town, until he saw the northbound train coming. Then he galloped on with her, just in time to drop reins at the livery stable and hurry across the street to the station. There was nobody on the street, nor on the station platform except the depot agent, who was helping to load some express, and a trainman who stood with a lantern at the steps of the first car.

Peppermint kept his hold on Janie's arm till they were up the steps and in the car. The train began to move before they found seats, up front. Peppermint sank down in his seat exultantly.

"Well, here we are!" he said.

Janie only looked at him. But all his exultation was suddenly gone. "Of course, you don't have to marry me," he said.

"Of course I don't," she agreed.

What could he do with her? He couldn't let her go back and tell what she knew. And she was the only one who did know. She must be kept silent.

She caught his glance, and there was a cold understanding gleam in her eye. "You don't want to marry me, now, do you?" she said.

He didn't think it necessary to answer.

"You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you?" she said.

"Are you crazy?"

"No. Not at all. I feel really sane, for the first time in my life. I wish I wasn't. It was so much nicer being sort of crazy."

"Shut up!" he said, as the news butcher approached.

The boy had a basket of fruit and candy. Peppermint licked his lips.

"You got any peppermint candy?" he asked.

"Nope," said the boy. "But I've got some chocolates."

"Chocolates!" Peppermint muttered in disgust. "Well, give me some."

As he reached in his pocket for some money, he was galvanized by a voice in the seat behind him.

It said, "I've got some peppermint

candy. Have some?"

A hand appeared over the back of the seat, holding a soiled paper bag, in which Peppermint could see some mangled sticks of peppermint candy.

He whirled, pulling his gun. He knew that he was in a trap and that Sheriff Chilao would have a gun on him. But he had shot his way out of many a trap.

This time, he didn't get in a shot. The sheriff's gun was spitting fire in his face . . .

It all happened in an instant, and Janie was not so much shocked over seeing Peppermint killed as seeing the sheriff here on the train. After the conductor and brakeman and porter had come and taken Peppermint's body away, and there was some semblance of order in the coach, the sheriff paid some attention to Janie. He told her to sit down and he would tell her all about it.

"I thought all along that you was tryin' to fool me," he said. "So I didn't chase after Hub."

"But you killed him!"

"No, I didn't kill him."

FOR several hours Janie had been in a state of shock, in which nothing had affected her very much. She had called it sanity, to be able to reason and talk and not to feel. Whether it was sanity or shock, it was gone in an instant, and now she was suffering a variety of emotions.

"But I saw him, tied to the saddle! He was dead!"

"He was tied to the saddle, but he wasn't dead. You see, when I didn't chase after him, he came back. I had been listenin' to you and Peppermint, and Hub slipped up on me. He was goin' to blow me to Kingdom Come. I told him what you and Peppermint were goin' to do. He wouldn't believe it. I had to make him believe it to save my neck. I talked him into playin' dead."

"Playing dead!" Janie echoed. In all her bewilderment one fact stood gloriously clear: Hub was not dead! "But why? Why did he play dead?"

"To see what you and Peppermint would do. I'd heard what you said, and Hub hadn't. There was just one way for him to find out."

The train swayed and roared over a bridge. The gaunt steel beams, touched by the light of a rising moon, whipped past and the window menacingly. Janie cringed. Her world was swaying and roaring and threatening to crash upon her.

"Did he—see me get on the train?"

"Yep."

Janie tried to stay the crash another instant. "Did he know that Peppermint was forcing me to go?"

The sheriff gave her a long look. "Forcin' you to go?"

She saw that he didn't know, and that he didn't believe it. And neither would Hub!

"He's got to believe me!" she breathed. "I've never lied to him, and he's never lied to me. I told him I loved Peppermint—or thought I did. I'll tell him that I lost my head when Peppermint came, but when I saw what kind of man he was, it killed all the love I ever had for him!"

"Sure," smiled the sheriff. "Every gal's got a right to change her mind."

She turned on him fiercely. "You don't believe me. But Hub will!"

The sheriff scratched his chin. "Well—Hub's young and sort of trustin'. And he likes you a lot."

"Hub's the grandest man in the world!" she said fervently.

"He's still alive, too," said the sheriff dryly. "That's a point in his favor."

Hours passed, hours of agony for Janie. And all the time the train was carrying her farther away. There was only one train a day in each direction.

She and the sheriff got off at Sunvalley and waited there for the next train back.

Long before the train whistled for Beene Junction, Janie was standing in the aisle. The sheriff followed her out upon the swaying platform.

"You act like you're kind of anvious to get back home," he said.

She didn't answer. Her mind was numb with questions: Would Hub believe her? Would he, by any chance, be waiting for her? Could she make him understand?

The train slowed down, and she strained her eyes to see familiar objects near the station. Then the platform slid alongside. It was empty, not a person in sight, not a soul—Yes, there was one, back there in the shadows—could it be the one person in the world she ever cared to see again?

Yes, it could be. It was.

She was down the steps before the train stopped, and Hub stepped out of the shadows. For an instant each stood motionless, then, somehow, she was in his arms, crying unashamedly, joyfully.

"He made me go, Hub! I found out I didn't love him, Hub! I love you, Hub!"

She babbled incoherently, and he held her, saying, "You come back — you come back—"

THE train puffed on, with the sheriff waving them goodbye from the steps. They were in semi-darkness again, with only a dim light from the station showing.

She told him everything, the whole truth, and he believed her. Hub knew how hard it was to make these confessions.

"But it wouldn't make any difference, now that you're back," he said. "You're here, and I'm here—just where we meant to be last night."

But their happiness was alloyed with sorrow as they talked of Peppermint. "He got a raw deal," Hub said. "It wasn't all his fault."

"No," she said. "It wasn't all his fault. He didn't do the thing they sent him to the penitentiary for."

But he had done so many other things—things she didn't want to think about any more.

"In a little while the train for Wichita will be comin' along," Hub said. "We'll be on it."

"Oh! Could we?"

"Well, why not?" he asked.

"Pastor Pete was expecting us today."

Pastor Pete had moved from Quailtown to Wichita two years previously. Janie wouldn't think of letting anyone else perform the ceremony.

"This ain't his last day for marryin' folks, is it? Pastor Pete will marry us tomorrow, when we get there!"

Tomorrow! Always tomorrow. He held her close. He was going to stand right here on the platform till the train came along.

The station agent came out and peered at them, carrying a lantern. The light reflected upon his glasses, giving them a merry sort of twinkle.

"You folks want somethin'?" he asked.

"We're waitin' for the next train," said Hub.

"It's an hour late. Might as well come in the waitin' room and make yourself at home."

"Much obliged," said Hub. "But we'll just wait here."

He felt more at home, under the stars, in the night, with Janie beside him. And he didn't want to miss that train . . .

Death Is For Killers

By RALPH BERARD

Fifty yards was good sure range for Karlstin's 35-40 Winchester—but Karlstin forgot that Death didn't always come gun-backed!

Then Karlstin's rifle spoke, a sudden quick snap of sound, smoke, and flame!

OUTSIDE the window of the little log cabin's kitchen a flurry of damp snow was hanging a warning banner of coming winter on the naked limbs of scattered alders.

Old Jake Frisby neglected his simmering pan of griddle cakes long enough to look at the dreary landscape. "Ain't cold enough to stay yet," the grey-haired old-timer opined, "but it's a warning. We got to kill us a couple bears so we got plenty fresh meat come the real freeze-up."

Jep Karlstin let his narrowed eyes shift to where two big game rifles leaned in a corner behind the small iron cook stove. "Yep, the younger man agreed. "Better get out this afternoon if she lets up snowing."

Karlstin finished off the two brown griddle cakes on his plate and watched the look of keen satisfaction on the old

prospector's face as Frisby flipped three other cakes on the frying pan. It might seem kind of funny, but not being able to get the old man's griddle cakes any longer would be Karlstin's biggest regret about killing the funny old duffer.

Young Karlstin had planned things mighty carefully. He had had to play up to old Jake almost a year before the old fellow had finally agreed to the partnership. Frisby had been bringing plenty of gold into Goldville, from the hills for a good many years.

Jep Karlstin had never been very scrupulous about how he made his stakes in life. He had killed a man in Kansas once and had got better than three thousand out of it without even being suspected.

HIS plan for getting rid of Jake was just as fool-proof. They would go bear hunting together like they always did when fresh meat got low. Karlstin would wait till they got in the timber where bear sign was plentiful and fresh. They would separate, of course. They always did. That allowed them to cover more territory. But Karlstin would trail old Jake instead of the bear. He would shoot him with the heavy hunting rifle from quite a distance, then he'd come back to the cabin for the little jackass they used to pack out high grade stuff from Jake's rich strike.

Karlstin would make the full day's pack into Goldville with his partner's body and tell Sheriff Golden, "I killed the old fellow by mistake, sheriff. I begged him a lot of times not to wear that big bear skin coat of his when we hunted. He came crawling over a long and raised up like a bear reaching for huckleberries."

Frisby dumped the three browned-to-a-turn cakes on Karlstin's plate with a good-natured grin. "You sure are hungry this morning, lad."

"You make swell griddle cakes," Karlstin said. He took a deep breath and sailed into the new supply of food. His turn came to fry cakes while Frisby ate his and by then, the snow had turned to rain. Jake, looking out the window, said: "Too wet to go after bear today . . . maybe tomorrow."

Karlstin nodded. They washed dishes. The rain stopped enough so Karlstin could go outside and fix up a mud mix to re-chink a few loose places between the logs of the cabin. He wanted things snug and tight for winter if he was going to be there alone. He had picked up a little plaster of Paris in Goldville. By sprinkling it with his mud mixture, he made a sort of pliable cement which worked fine.

The partners rose early next day to a bright dawn. Karlstin started cooking cakes while Jake mixed a new supply. Jake's batter always had to stand and age for twenty-four or forty-eight hours. "That's what makes 'em good," the old fellow clucked as he set the batter crock on the back of the stove.

They started after bear in the afternoon. The weather had turned crisp and dry. "They'll be out to feed this evenin'," Jake said. "Got to fatten up b'fore they hibernate."

They were two miles from the cabin when Jake picked up the first fresh sign. The old prospector dropped to hands and knees to study a pair of prints, each as big as a small ham. Karlstin noted how Jake sure looked like a bear himself crawling along in his big coat and he chuckled to himself.

Jake rose with a hunter's keen excitement in his eyes. "Right close, lad," he whispered. "Wind is toward us. He ain't got our scent. You head off a hundred yards or so south. "I'll head north. Careful now, lad. Bears is smart hombres."

Karlstin nodded. He moved off to

the right but kept glancing back, not letting Jake get much out of his sight. There wasn't any use fooling around or delaying what he planned.

Fifty yards was good sure range for Karlstin's 35-40 Winchester. When Jake got about that distance Karlstin didn't move off any further. A feeling of tenseness and excitement took hold of him. As he crept forward, watching for the best opportunity to plug old Jake, he forgot about the bear.

There was a sudden breaking of brush to Karlstin's left. He brought up his rifle. He saw Jake turn toward him and bring up his rifle part way. A monstrous grizzly had raised on its haunches in the low brush half way directly between them. It had evidently been so intent on the huckleberry bush beside it that it failed to hear them.

Jake didn't level his gun. He saw Karlstin and raised his right palm forward, a warning that it might be dangerous to shoot when the bear was directly between them.

The bear stood still, high on its hind feet, sniffing the air, turning its shaggy head from side to side uncertainly. It was so close Karlstin could see its tiny bead-like eyes. There was no chance of missing a shot like that.

KARLSTIN leveled his rifle. A slight tremor of nervousness shook his body as he drew the beaded sight carefully into the notch. Old Jake stood still as a statue, waiting for the bear to move a little, or maybe make a sudden dash.

No chance to miss the old men either at that short range. Funny thing, too, old Jake was standing near a huckleberry bush just like the bear was. Except for his head, face and neck, his big coat made him look just like the bear.

Karlstin's rifle spoke, a sudden quick snap of sound, smoke and flame. The bear seemed to lift straight upward, then it settled into great long, awkward leaps which carried it crashing away in the brush at remarkable speed.

Old Jake just sort of leaned forward against space. His body slumped from sight at the foot of the huckleberry bush. There was only the sound of the bear cracking through the brush in fearful flight. In a minute, it faded away and Jep Karlstin was left standing alone there in the brush holding the deadly 35-40 in the midst of a great, unnatural silence.

It was dark when Jep Karlstin got back to the cabin. He had just lighted a lamp when a tap sounded on the cabin door.

Karlstin's body tensed as he turned. He stood stark still staring at the door. The tap came again.

Karlstin steadied himself. He moved forward and opened the door. Jerry Kolback, a little half-witted mining man from further up the ridge, stood there blinking against the lamplight.

Kolback stepped inside without an invitation. "Can you fellows put me up for the night? Got to go to Goldville for supplies b'fore she freezes up."

Karlstin got a grip on himself. "I—I can put you up," he said putting grief in the tone of his voice. "Poor old Jake is dead. I—I killed him this afternoon." Karlstin slumped into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

Kolback was a little thin man with wiry muscles and bright black eyes. "You killed old Jake?" His tone was unbelieving.

"Accidentally," Karlstin grieved, "I took him for a bear. He's still out there in the woods and I can't bring him in till morning."

Kolback sat down and looked at the floor. There was a period of silence. Karlstin kept watching the little mining man, considering his next move. "I was planning," he explained brokenly, "to get the old fellow into Goldville and re-

port to Sheriff Golden."

Kolback glanced up at Karlstin, then dropped his eyes to the floor again. "Jake was my best friend," he said in a low voice. The little man was hard to savvy. His spooky mannerisms had always given Karlstin the creeps.

"I was thinking," Karlstin told Kolback finally, "if you're going to Goldville anyway, you could tell the sheriff what happened. Golden could ride out easier than I could take the body in and it's likely the old man would rather be buried here near his cabin. I could bring him down on the jackass tomorrow while you get the sheriff." Karlstin went on to explain the details of how he had taken old Jake for a bear and shot him, making his grief apparent as he went along.

When Karlstin had finished, Kolback just stood up and said, "There's a little moonlight. I'll start now. Should be back with Golden by tomorrow night."

Karlstin followed Kolback to the door, undecided, hesitating. "You better eat something first. You better get some rest."

But Kolback didn't turn around or even glance back. He didn't say anything. Karlstin stood in the doorway and watched him stalk off toward Goldville. His form became shadowy and melted quickly into the moonlight and Karlstin turned back inside, ill at ease.

Next day just before dark, Sheriff Golden reached the cabin. Kolback had come back with him. They found the door unbarred. Inside, old Jake's body lay stretched on a cot and Jep Karlstin's was sitting in a twisted mis-shapen heap on the floor nearby. It looked like Karlstin's death had been slow and painful.

"They're *both* dead," Kolback said with considerable surprise.

Golden didn't answer. He was a big slow-moving man with a logical mind. He remembered that the little jackass had been standing outside with its halter strap on. "Karlstin went out and got his partner today," the sheriff reconstructed, "but for some reason, he died shortly after getting back himself."

KOLBACK said uneasily, "I'll help you bury 'em in the morning, sheriff."

"Can't do much till then," Golden agreed. "We'll have to sleep here."

It was in the morning when Golden started getting breakfast that he stirred the pancake batter old Jake had last mixed and thought it acted unusually stiff. Then he found the plain mark of a teaspoon in the sack of plaster of Paris Jep Karlstin had left sitting on the back part of the warming oven. He turned to Kolback, a grim expression forming on his face. "Almost fried us some of those cakes," he said. "Likely Jake mistook that stuff for baking powder, didn't put in very much." The sheriff paused then, stroked his chin. "Or maybe he did it on purpose. Maybe this Jep Karlstin was plotting something against the old man and old Jake suspected it. Either way, guess it would take quite a while to kill a man but it would sure enough do it. It's lucky the batter'd stiffened enough more by this morning so I noticed something was wrong."

Kolback rolled his eyes. "You mean it might be murder?" Kolback shuddered.

Golden started mixing fresh batter. "Could be," he agreed thoughtfully. "Often turns out that way when two men live alone too long with a rich gold mine. Anyway you look at it, though, there's no problem here for me except to bury them."

"And to see you don't get none of that plaster of Paris in our hot cakes," Kolback added. "After what's happened I ain't got such a good appetite anyhow."

Gun Wolves of Thunder Mesa

By ED EARL REPP

Cattle ran wild in those tangled bottoms, and men bought onto Rio range behind flaming six-guns, and if old Smokey Harper and Johnny Grimm chose to take a herd up the trail someday, they'd pay for each longhorn with hot lead, and see Satan deliver their drive at Dodge!

He'd pick them off now or never, and that meant nerves of steel and lightning-fast guns!

CHAPTER I

Mystery Killing

THE river seeped quietly between crumbling adobe banks, obscured by tangles of mesquite and scrub cedar. In the dark bosque there was only the water's soft murmur and the stomp of a horse standing restlessly before a spring wagon drawn up on the road. Old Smokey Harper crouched on the seat like a perched buzzard, his pale eyes nervously probing the brush.

Above the matted jungle a red sickle moon hung like a big grin on the sky's black face. Smokey's keen ears seemed to crawl with the strain of listening for a repetition of the cry that had caused him to pull up. Silence mocked back at him.

It hammered in his senses until he

could stand it no longer. A shout tore through his tight, leathery jaws.

"Carter! Was that you?" he sang out. "Hey! Carter!"

Down the bosque suddenly poured a welter of sounds, conjuring a picture of lunging horses and chopping hooves. Then a cry slashed again through the night and immediately the mysterious riders were bearing down-river from him.

"Carter Baggs, or I'm a knock-kneed salamander!" he grated, and dragged out his .44. He stood up to rein the horse, a lean figure in stiff levis, faded shirt and a greasy Stetson the color of hard work, hanging down the back of his neck by its lanyard string. His ram's-horn mustaches were plastered by the wind against his cheeks.

SOMETHING Smokey Harper had given two years of his life for was oozing through his fingers like quicksilver. Until today, all the words in lawyer Carter Baggs' Blackstone had been unable to spell a solution for him and his young partner, Johnny Grimm.

But this afternoon, in Hachita, the little border lawyer had come ferretting into the General Store after Smokey, his face pinched with excitement. In a shadowy corner, he spoke three sentences that warmed the blood in old Smokey's arteries.

"Jake Weber's sent for me, Smokey. I got a good notion it's about this Skull grant, and I look for a hole for us to crawl out of yet! See you at your place tonight."

Smokey had been driving fast to get back when the cry arrested him in the bosque. He drove now with the tocsins of fear swinging wildly in his mind. Carter Baggs was up there with that pack of horsebackers, and he was in danger.

Credit-bought boxes of grub danced on the flat-bed while the turns swung this way and that. The brasada began to absorb the rattle of shod hoofs, so that Smokey got little of it above the jumping thunder of his own wagon. But now a new and ominous roll of sound crawled through to him.

Shots . . . a sprinkling of them . . . and then, suddenly, a wicked snarl of close-spaced pistol fire!

An instant later, silence surged back. Long jaws frozen, Smokey Harper raced on until the horse shied from a form that flashed under the wagon. He set squalling brake-shoes. The buckboard bounced heavily across something that had a rubbery yield.

By a match's stingy illumination, Smokey went back to find a man lying on his face in the dirt. An iron tire had printed a white belt across his black box coat. Smokey turned him over, his ears keening for warning sounds. It was Carter Baggs, and he was dead as a log.

Soft chunks of lead had chewed the front of his spavined chest. A hole in his cheek seeped blackish blood.

The sharp lines of Smokey Harper's cheekbones ridged under flat, brown flesh. A whirlwind of wrath twisted through him, obliterating fear, leaving him shaky with hate. He wished with fierce recklessness for a saddle horse to follow the outfit that had done this. Their horses were climbing the lava spill to Thunder Mesa, now.

Foss Hassett's wolves, gorged with blood, were loping for the home lair. And Smokey could only load the body onto the wagon and head for the ranch.

Dulling the pity that turned in the hard-case old brush-buster's heart, there was a strain of worry about his and Johnny Grimm's own position.

Smokey felt like a father to Johnny. He couldn't remember that the youngster was nearly twenty-two, and as tough and resourceful a man as only the brush country can make.

All he could think of was his promise to Johnny's dad, when he died ten years ago, that he'd see the button started in some profitable business before he himself hung up his saddle. Johnny's dad had left $2,000 to do it.

On Smokey's advice, Johnny had bought a little iron that followed the coves and peninsulas formed by the ambling base of Thunder Mesa. The G-Down had plenty of good grass, but it was separated from the river by deep tangles of mesquite and buck-brush a mile wide on each side of the stream. Cattle headed for the strip of Rio that made the G-Down a boundary. In the tangled bottoms, they ran as wild as mustangs. There was no roping them in that jungle.

Some crossed the river and ranged wide in outlaw bunches. Others filled border-jumper's loops. Smokey and Johnny Grimm knew it was clear out that mesquite forest or give up. They were learning why the iron had sold so cheap.

The old puncher's bones ached when he remembered the days of chopping, dragging, plowing. Grubbing out the big trees with a team. Sawing it all into firewood to be sold for food-money. Smokey Harper began to cuss himself for getting the boy into a hopeless-looking mess. They had a fine piece of land, now, but could they hold onto it until the spring roundup brought them some cash?

His cup went completely sour the day Sheriff Hawks rode out and served them with a paper. They were being told to get off the land and get off quick.

Foss Hassett, who owned the big Skull spread down-river thirty miles, said it was part of the original Montoya Grant, that once embraced seventy miles of the Big River. He had maps to prove it. The man to whom Johnny Grimm had paid his money had been a squatter. He didn't own a foot of the ranch. And neither did Johnny Grimm.

Carter Baggs told the partners there was a rotten stench in the air. The old-timer who had sold to them hadn't been seen for the two years. He'd been a stranger to Hachita when he came in announcing he had bought the tract from Hassett.

Glumness laid hold of Smokey as the lights of the ranchhouse popped up like candles against the mesa's black shoulder. Whatever Carter had discovered might never be learned now. Unless old Jake Weber had miraculously missed the wide swath of Hassett's greed, they stood to lose everything. . . .

FOR a few moments after the flare of light from the doorway pointed up the stark and bloody bundle in the back of the wagon, Johnny Grim wasn't able to talk.

A heavy-shouldered, sun-blackened cowboy in seasoned brush-popper's clothing, he stood gripping the catch-bar at the rear of the wagon, staring with his wide gray eyes at the dead man.

"Where'd you find him, Smokey? What happened?"

"Hassett's s t i n k e r s got 'im!" Smokey's voice came out with a vicious twist. The light showed him hollow-cheeked and heavy of brow, the brim of his hat fastened back, cavalry fashion.

The story came grudgingly through his lips. Johnny's face set like cement.

"Search him?" he clipped, when Smokey fell silent. "He may carry some clue to what Weber wanted to see him about."

But the corpse gave up no secrets. "Now, I wonder," Johnny frowned. "Maybe he hadn't been to see Weber yet. The thing to do is to get Hawks. Then we'll check on Jake Weber."

"Why don't we just make out a bill of sale and turn it over to Hassett?"

Smokey rapped. "Delay is just what he counts on to help him get clear. He had a reason for killin' Baggs. We ain't going to find it a-settin' here. Let's ride!"

"You always were the one to think with the seat of your britches instead of your head," Johnny snapped. "We don't know for certain who killed Baggs. And we won't go skallyhootin' after a red herring until we look the scene over with the sheriff."

Smokey Harper's eyes bristled. "And then it'll be too late! You listen to me, young fella—you ain't so damn smart you can teach an old campaigner like me how to fight. While I can straddle a hoss, I savvy how to buck Foss Hassett's breed."

That was Smokey's way; stubborn as a new rope, cantankerous and narrow-minded when crossed. But tonight, mulishness was running s t r o n g in Johnny too. Desperation had not improved tempers any around the G-Down spread.

"You savvy a lot of things, don't you, Smokey?" he drawled. "Like how to buy land. Every cowman in Hachita warned us against this outfit. But you bought it. Seems to me our troubles dated from right about them."

Smokey looked stunned, as if his own son had quirted him. His eyes filled with hurt; then anger came to turn them black and hot.

"Feller as smart as you," he gritted, "don't need a ramrod. I'm drawin' my time."

Big Johnny Grimm was instantly remorseful. He fetched a crooked grin to his lips.

"Aw now, Smokey! Maybe I shot off my mouth a little. But so did you, old timer! Now, look. You set gun-guard over Baggs and the place whilst I get Hawks—"

Smokey repeated: "I'm drawin' my time. You ain't needin' a guardian any longer."

On shapeless old boots he started for the house. Johnny moved to catch him by the shoulder.

"Snap out of it, Smokey— We're in this together. It's your spread as much as mine."

For the third time, Smokey Harper said: "Leggo. I'm drawin' my time."

Johnny stood aside and let him go. In him was a mounting anger at the old timer's blind mulishness. His pepper-pot disposition was tolerable enough when things were going smoothly. But at a time like this, with a dead man to be taken care of and the wolves of hell howling close about—

Johnny Grimm was gone when Smokey emerged with his soogans. He had ridden off to Hachita. Stony-jawed, Smokey took off down-river.

CHAPTER II

Message for a Dead Man

THE cold night air was a good damper for the fire in his soul. With less then a mile behind him, he suddenly grunted: "Damned old fool! The boy's right—partways."

Another mile, and Smokey had rehired himself. Recollection of his promise to Johnny's dad dragged through him like barbed wire. But he didn't reckon his pride would stand bending to the point of going back and asking Johnny's pardon.

Smokey cut towards the mesa, to the place where Jake Weber ran goats and raised his own vegetables, as he had done for thirty years.

Weber did not immediately answer his call. The little mud hut was dark in a chaparro of cottonwoods. Impatiently, Smokey put his .44 on full cock.

"Come out of that rat-hole, Jake, or

I'll blast you out!"

Jake Weber's tinny voice lifted hurriedly. "Comin', Smokey. Put up your hardware."

From the roan heights of his gelding, Smokey stared down at him. "So you're still alive."

"G-gawd, I hope so!" the nester chattered, hitching at rope-belted overalls. "I heard shootin' tonight, Smokey. Up thataway. I been layin' low in my cellar."

"Seen Carter Baggs?"

"Baggs? Me? W-why should I?"

The goatherder was patently nervous. Smokey worried the trigger of his gun. "I ain't a mind for triflin', Weber. Baggs was killed tonight. He told me in town today that you sent for him. What you want with him?"

"Baggs dead?" Weber quavered. "Who done it, Smokey?"

Smokey stared down his nose with shell-hard eyes. "I ast you a question. What you want with Baggs tonight?"

The steadiness of the gun seemed to fold Jake Weber's soul into a small knot. "Just—just nothin'! Heard a trail windy the other day I thought might interest him."

"Pertainin' to the G-Down, mebbe?"

"In a kind of a way," Weber muttered. "Feller stops in here for a meal and gets to talkin'. Claims he been a puncher on Hassett's Skull outfit till he quit. Things he didn't like, savvy? Nobody goes on or off that ranch without the permission of one of the five gents that rod it. Every gate's got a chain of five padlocks. Each boss has a key. Hell of a place to work, he tells me. Down in High Lonesome, they call it Rancho Adios, 'cause it's adios for anybody that busts in.

"They's a herd of cattle Hassett keeps penned by theirselves, and even the hands don't go near it. But this feller did one night, and b'God he claims them steers have all got the black-leg! Two-three thousand of 'em!"

Smokey's nerves twitched. "Why don't the health department make him destroy the brutes? It's against the law to treat blackleg. Critters never recover anyway."

"Health department don't know about it," Weber grinned.

A riding impatience clamped upon Smokey. "That all you were going to tell Baggs?"

"That's all, pardner."

Smokey lifted a hand and plunged back into the night.

At the G-Down, he grubbed in the store-room until he found an ancient set of veterinary instruments they had occasional use for. With the kit tied behind the cantle, he departed at a high lope.

Bales of loose gray clouds barrelled up from behind Thunder Mesa, driven by a cold, searching wind. Smokey Harper had been gone onto two hours. Under a black reef of the mesa, Sheriff Clay Hawks set his lantern down.

"Here's where they climbed up to Thunder," he said to Johnny Grimm. "And yonder a few miles is where Paso County ends and my jurisdiction with it. I can't lead a posse over there, Johnny. That'd be dead against the book."

"Forget the book!" one of the shivering possemen growled. "Carter Baggs was one square little gent, and nobody, Hassett or the devil himself, is going to murder him and live to brag on it."

"But I don't figure on losing my star for following him." Hawks was a lank, ramrod-straight man with a small gray mustache and a lean red nose.

Deep in Johnny Grimm's eyes, red sparks crumbled and flared like ironwood coals. "I've got no star to worry about. I can follow those tracks, if I get started before the rain."

"Alone? Where's that broken-down

pard of yours?"

Johnny squatted, pretending to study the imprint of a new bar-shoe. "Him and me have called it quits. Never did hit it off. If the G-Down ain't good enough for him, I—I I'll make out alone." He straightened suddenly, cuffing his hands against the frost.

Hawks masked a grin. "You being alone seems to put it up to me." With a snap, he jerked his star from his vest. "Poley, I hereby appoint you actin' sheriff of Paso County until I get back. Rest of you go back to bed. I ain't taking the responsibility of bringing back a dozen civilians safe."

When they began to argue, he raised a gauntletted hand. "Git! Whilst I'm still in Paso County, I'm giving the orders. See that Carter Baggs gets to town safe. We'll be back in time for the funeral, unless we get tied up by half a dozen funerals on Rancho Adios."

AT DAWN, the groaning clouds burst. Rain drenched the hilly mesa. Smokye's teeth rattled like dice in a box as he rode, grumbling. The wet air tightened his joints.

For an hour the storm whipped the cowering rangeland. Then it began to slacken, and through the steam beating up from the ground Smokey saw four strands of barbed wire blocking his way.

Here the men he was following had bent left. Their tracks were all but obliterated, consisting now of small round puddles at intervals. He had put another mile behind him when he spotted a yellow ribbon of mud coming from a dense motte of junipers to a gate in the high, four-strand fence.

With rain drooling from his gaunt jaws, Smokey sprang down at the gate. The clayey adobe mud squashed under his boots, fouling his big spurs.

A wooden sign, with letters burned deep, stopped him. "Skull Ranch, No Trespassing. Se Prohibe De Pasar."

Locking the ponderous, cottonwood-pole gate, there was a chain of five massive padlocks. Jake Weber had told it true about Rancho Adios. There was a huge brass affair as big as a horse-shoe, that must be Hassett's personal lock.

Smokey ripped out his forty-five and eared back the hammer. To ride all the way from Hachita to the Skull and then he blocked by five padlocks wasn't in his bag of plans. His idea was to pass himself off as an itinerant veterinary who had stumbled by accident onto the ranch.

Then a gun-barrel was planted against the back of Smokey Harper's neck.

"Drop that cutter, you gandered old buzzard!"

A powerful hand dropped on his shoulder. Ice-green eyes bored up at Smokey. His captor didn't come up much higher than Smokey's crooked nose. But three men the size of the G-Down ramrod could have stood behind him and never over-lapped the edges of the sawed-off puncher's wide shoulders. He looked as if he were all gristle. A burly brush-jacketed man was coming from the junipers at a dog-trot.

"Make *habla,* cowboy," the squat man growled. "Any reason why I shouldn't blow you apart like you was gonna do that padlock?"

Smokey combed his store of alibis. The heavy-limbed man came up and stood scowling.

"Who is the jasper, Hank?" he grunted. He had one good eye, and his jaws were covered by whiskers as crisp and dark as mattress stuffing.

"Name of Ike Ledbetter," lied Smokey. "Few miles back I run across some Skull steers runnin' loose. Figgered I'd ride in and tip your boss off. But I reckon you can take care of it instead. That bein' all, I'll ride—"

"The hell you will!" Hank's words were like bullets. "One-Eye, this jigger couldn't tell the truth settin' on a mountain o' Bibles. I was by the north fence this morning and it's solid as oak."

One-Eye, whose blackened fingers and bulging muscles spoke of hours in a blacksmith shop, nodded wisely.

"We better take him in. Climb your bronc, Ledbetter, and set cautious."

Desperation jarred Smokey. If he went into this barb-wire section of hell as a prisoner, he'd never come out. He bent down.

"All right, strangers. Just let me get my hawg-leg . . ."

"No, you don't!"

Hank lurched to stop him, his gun-hand jutting.

With a grunt, then, Smokey pivoted. His fist slammed the chunky Skull man's wrist as the gun roared.

The hot whip-lash of the revolver smacked Smokey's cheek. Lunging blindly, he brought a haymaker into Hank's jaw. The man stumbled backwards into One-Eye, his gun flying free.

Flinging Hank aside, the blacksmith charged Smokey. His powerful rush planted him against the gate. One-Eye's fist came murderously at Smokey's head . . . and found a peeled pole, as the older man ducked. One-Eye roared, his knuckles gouting blood.

Smokey bounced up, his arms flailing. Before his charge the blacksmith crowded back. Smokey's yellow slicker sailed out behind, caught by the flapping wind.

He put all he had into a blow that smashed against One-Eye's jaw. But the black beard padded the bone. The blacksmith laughed and surged back. Smokey went cold in the stomach. He'd put everything into that swing.

For a moment then, the Skull riders were getting in each other's way, as Hank staggered in. Smokey grabbed for his Colt. Before he could pull it from the mud, the pair were on him.

He brought the gun up in a roundhouse swing that found One-Eye's moon face. Hair, flesh, and steel meshed sickeningly. One-Eyed sighed wheezily and went down.

In the instant's silence following his collapse, the muffled thud of hoof's built to Smokey's ears. More Skull riders!

He lashed ahead like a grizzled tornado. Hank's hands pawed futilely. Harper laid the gun-barrel across his skull. . . . Then there were two men in the mud.

Smokey just had time to wrap his legs around the barrel of his pony and spur to the trees before another rider burst over the knoll.

CHAPTER III

Doc Fanner—Itinerant Vet

THE newcomer was a big, thickset man in a sodden gray hat and black rubber slicker. When he saw the forms in the mud, he lifted his mount to a dead run down the slope. Thrusting a massive key into the largest lock, he strode through the gate. Then he dragged Hank up by his shirt-front.

"Talk, damn you!" he roared. "You let somebody through the gate?"

Hank swayed on rubbery legs. "Stopped 'im, boss!" he fumbled, pawing blood and mud from his face. "He was tryin' to break in."

Foss Hassett's meaty features jerked. "Who was it? Some health department rep—?"

"Never saw him before." One-Eye sat up and muttered that through swollen lips.

"What'd he look like?" Hassett labored under the pressure of worry. His eyes, hard and brown as crockery, twitched.

"Why he—" The bearded blacksmith stole a look at Hank. "You tell 'im, Hank. I don't reckon I had him sized up much 'fore he busted me in the face."

Hank wiped his nose. "He was totin' a slicker, boss. We couldn't see his clothes. He's got a mustache that looks like a rope a hoss had chewed. Sort of a dapple gray."

Hassett's heavy jaws bulged. "An old man! What the hell are you two—cripples? What kind of a hoss was he forkin'?"

The guard's voices collided like wagons. "B l u e r o a n!" One-Eye jerked. "Chestnut!" said Hank. Then they fell to arguing.

"My God!" Hassett groaned. "Sure it wasn't a circus lady in pink tights? Get back to the house, One-Eye, and set guards on that sick-pen. I'm takin' Hank to town with me. We're out of dope for them brutes."

As they split up, an idea burst upon Smokey's brain. "Hoss," he breathed, "you and me've got a date in High Lonesome. I'll git inside that fence yet!"

Johnny Grimm and Sheriff Hawks found wet-weather tracking cold, disagreeable work. Luckily, the storm held off until dawn. They rode hard, hoping to close the gap before rain spoiled the sign. Johnny's heart was a lump of lead when he thought of Smokey pushing lonesomely across the hills to some new, strange country.

When the storm came, only one set of prints was readable. They lit down and studied them.

"They didn't help us by ridin' single-file," Hawks pondered. "All but the prints of this guy who rode last are tromped out. See that bar-shoe? We'll know him easy enough. You won't find three bar-shoes in a whole town."

Johnny's bloody features lifted. "Look yonder, Sheriff! A four-strand fence. Hassett's Skull spread!"

At the gate, apprehension's cold fingers found them. In silence they scanned blood-stains in the mud, the imprint of a couple of revolvers. Johnny scrubbed his stubbled jaw.

"Been a scrap here. Where's Bar-Shoe goin'?"

He pointed out the set of tracks leading towards town. No other prints within many feet.

Hawks came eagerly against the cantle. "This is a break! He's left the bunch and headed for town. Mebbe for whiskey for the crowd. We can't bust into the ranch very easy, but we can track this gent down and make him talk!"

They galloped through the junipers and down a draw that emptied onto a bench a b o v e High Lonesome. T h e town's mud-plastered buildings, dark with wet, lay along the river. Hawks led the way into the main street.

Among the eight horses at hitch-racks, they found none with a bar-shoe. Nor, at the far end of town, did they find evidence that the Skull rider had left.

"Must have stabled at the livery barn," the lawman jerked.

That way they rode, and pushed into the warm, fragrant atmosphere of the feed barn. . . .

From an alley, Bar-Shoe saw them vanish through the door. He was Smokey Harper, and his old heart twisted at sight of the boy. But pride rode him like a pair of spurs. Johnny had said he was the cause of all this.

Smokey left town at a jogging clip. He'd finish it too—before he dragged his rowels across the G-Down again!

In a deep barranca, he dismounted. Hassett and Hank Moreland had still been in town when he left. He peeled his slicker and stuffed it deep in the brush. Standing there in his black steerhide chaps and bearskin vest, he was conscious of the difference in his

appearance. He loosened the brim of his JB and let it come down puncher-fashion.

If One-Eye and Hank had such a hazy recollection of him, he could capitalize on the fact. He uncorked the bottle of ink he had bought in High Lonesome. Smearing it liberally in his mustache and hair, he came up with a glossy black pelt a poolhall romeo might have envied.

"Manicure my nails and call me Dude," he grinned at his reflection in a puddle. "If Hank knows me now, I'll eat my hat. And it'll be my last meal, too."

SURPRISE slowed Foss Hassett and his keg-shaped foreman as they approached the man-padlocked gate. An elderly man in a bearhide vest and black chaps, a big bundle across the back of his cantle, sat in the middle of the road with his hat in hand, solemnly scratching his glistening black hair.

His back was to them, but he twisted his head to stare as they rode up. Relief touched his puzzled eyes.

"Howdy, strangers! Whichun's the road to Salt City? Got my bearins mixed." Smokey Harper watched suspicion smoulder in Hassett's cold eyes.

"Due east," Hassett's words had a hard bite. "But you'll have to swing wide of my ranch. Forty miles."

Smokey kept that polite grin on his lips. His gaze flicked to Hank, but recognition did not darken the foreman's eyes. "And how far if a man was to cross your ranch?"

"A man wouldn't cross my ranch. As a matter of fact, it's only fifteen miles as the crow flies. But, stranger, it's a long, tough road. Some fellows never do make it."

Smokey shrugged. "Only reason I asked, I'm in a hurry. I'm Doc Fanner, the wanderin' vet. Got a call to treat an epizoodic of scratches in Salt City. But I reckon it can wait twenty-four hours longer."

Hassett shot his foreman a glance as Smokey turned his horse. A queer lustre penetrated the soapy green film over his eyes.

"Just a minute, Doc!" Smokey saw the raw greed behind Hassett's smile. "Fact is, I'm having a little trouble with my own cattle. Nothing serious, you understand— But if you want to give 'em the once-over, you're welcome to cross my land afterwards."

Doc Fanner scrubbed his spiny jowls. "Fair enough. Save us both some trouble. Lead on, pardner."

The sick-pen was below range level in a big wallow. Hank shook out a loop and snubbed a big yellow Brahma down for Smokey's inspection. Smokey untied his roll of instruments. He was a little startled to notice the rusty condition of them. In the darkness of the stock-room, he hadn't realized how thick the red scale was. Hassett noted it also.

"You make them things out of rusty scrap iron?"

Smokey chuckled. "Treated a cow with water on the knee and it plumb rusted all my insterments! Matter of fact, this-here rain seems to've played heck with 'em, don't it?"

"It sure does, Doc," Foss Hassett agreed.

Smokey selected a long steel paddle and wiped some of the rust on his chaps. Holding the sick steer's tongue down with it, he stared into the cavity. A frown grew on his forehead. His fingers then went to rubbing the swollen knee-joints. Sharp crackling noises arose when he massaged the gaseous pockets. Wagging his head, he stood up.

"Black-leg! You know what that means? Every cow in your herd that's affected will have to be destroyed. It's against the law to treat it!"

"So?"

Smokey's backbone crawled. He knew Hassett would gun him as quickly as he'd stamp on an ant, if he thought it profitable or necessary. There was nothing pleasant about his face at this moment. In addition to the yellowish blotches bad liquor had put under his skin, anger added a high flush.

"But I tell you what." Smokey affected a secretive attitude, glancing sharply about. "Wouldn't be the first time I'd treated and saved a varmint with black-leg! I got no patience with these bull-headed cattle inspectors. I bet five hundred dollars I could cure your steers in two weeks' time!"

Hassett's breath hissed. "How?"

"Put 'em on barley and sugar! Yep. Barley an' sugar! Cure 'em every time. Barley reduces the fever and the sugar builds up their strength."

"Sounds screwy," Hassett grunted. "Never heard of that cure."

" 'Course you ain't! It's my own idea. Now, help me with this bag of tools. We'd best have a look at some more of the critters and see if black-leg's *all* you got!"

CHAPTER IV

Gun-Guest On Rancho Adios

BY THE time they raised the fortress-like ranch-house, Foss Hassett was in high spirits. Smokey had completely sold him on the idea of the barley-and-sugar cure. Hank Moreland had been sent back to High Lonesome to order several hundred pounds of barley and a few barrels of sugar. The Skull owner ushered the old cowpoke warmly into his immense home.

Brass lamps hung from *vigas* by chains. The main room was richly furnished with Mexican and Indian rugs and hand-carved furniture. Smoky's eyes, darting nervously under shaggy brows, did not miss the rifle loops in the walls.

A clanging triangle brought punchers stampeding to the small mess house where they ate. Hassett and the others of his deadly five dined in the main house.

Three men sat around the dining table when Smoking and the Skull boss entered. They were the main cogs in Foss Hassett's cattle empire, his brain-men and gunmen; Jack Lerch, his lawyer, small and weasel-eyed; Arch Sykes, tall and spare, heavy with artillery; and One-eyed Haley, ponderous, surly as a bear.

Buck knew, with a flood of relief, that One-Eye did not recognize him. He took a place at Hassett's right hand and plunged into the steaming food a Mexican girl set before him.

Midway through the meal Hank Moreland reappeared. Sullenly, he took his place and fell to the grub.

Outside, rain began to splatter on the sills. Hassett lit a cigar. "Reckon that gent in Salt City could wait 'til tomorrow? Mean weather to be ridin'. Glad to put you up here."

"Mighty kind of you, mister," said Smokey. "I reckon a vet with pneumonia is as bad as no vet at all. I'll take you up on that offer."

Lerch scowled at Hassett. But the big rancher, smiling, pointed with his cigar through a window.

"While you're here, Doc, you might as well have a look at those Herefords in the holdin' pen. They look okay to me, but if you find any of 'em about to come down with the quarter, we'll run 'em out."

Smokey reached for his hat. "I'll just do that."

He had hardly left when Jake Lerch, his fox-face twisted, leaped from the

chair. "You must be crazy, Foss! Leavin' this broken-down vet come onto Rancho Adios and run free!"

"God knows what kind o' tales he'll carry away with him!" One-Eye groaned.

Hassett stubbed his cigar on his plate. "Don't get your short-hairs up! The old doc's got an eye to an easy penny himself. He won't be carryin' windies now that he's incriminated himself by treatin' the animals."

"You ain't going to let him run loose," Lerch argued. "That G-Down job ain't so far behind us. He may be a sneakin' deputy—"

Hassett's wide lips twisted. "You talk like a bunch o' women. If Fanner gets to lookin' slanchwise, I'll dump him with the rest. What you need is a jolt of squirrel to get the taste of last night out of your mouths . . ."

The rainswept ranchyard was deserted. From the mess-house came the noise of many men at their food. Smokey rode into the trees as if heading for the holding corral. Beyond them, he tied his pony and quartered back.

The feeling that he was close to the kernel of this rank stew of murder and greed enveloped him. With cold sheets of water sluicing from the eaves upon him, he took up a position outside the window.

Hassett and his crowd were laughing, their voices loosened by the lubrication of good brandy.

"When I think of those mesquite-stompers clearing a mile of bosky for us!" Hassett said. "Building shacks and digging a well, too. I'll resell for three times what Grimm paid."

"Under the same set-up?" Arch Sykes chuckled.

"I think I deserve a bonus, Foss." Jake Lerch was only half-joking. "It was me that posed as a rancher and sold the place for you. Shoot, they'd have demanded an abstract showing I had clear title to the spread if I hadn't talked them out of it."

"We'll talk bonuses when that pair are off. Another thing—"

Smokey's hands closed on his Colts like meat-hooks. Anger whipped the blood up into his neck and ears. He'd heard all he needed to. He left the window and padded to the front door, figuring to get them off their guard.

He put on his best manners as he approached the dining room. Meticulously, he pawed his mustache smooth, and dropped his hat on a chair.

"Them cows seem to be okay, pardner—" he began . . . and stopped short with horror leaping into him.

One-Eye Haley's mouth fell open. Then he was roaring: "Boss! That's him! *The old jigger at the gate!*"

MEN were pulling guns and rushing the dazed puncher. Smokey's gun-move came after One-Eye piled on him with all his huge bulk. The gun stuck in its sheath as his arms were pinioned. Haley and Hassett likewise bore him down. Then they were dragging him to his feet.

"What's the idea?" Smokey yelled. "I'm no hold-up artist. I'm just ol' Doc Fanner, the wanderin'—"

"The wanderin' corpse, in about two minutes," drawled Foss Hassett.

He dragged Smokey to a mirror. Strength poured from the cowboy's fingertips like water out of a faucet.

White-rimmed eyes made two big circles against a face as green as grass. Drops of pea-green sweat coursed along his crooked nose and dripped from the end of it. An object that might once have been a mustache, but now resembled a revelling of moldy manila rope, hung from his upper lip. But the hair, except in front where the rain had sopped it, was black and shiny.

"Bring him along," Hassett snapped.

He led the way to a rear door.

Smokey began to leap and strain against the restraining hands. He bunched his long legs and kicked backwards, raking a raw gash in One-Eye's leg with his spur rowel. He fought like a tortured catamount. But his captors only held on the tighter and bashed their fists into his face until he sagged weakly.

Hassett unlocked a heavy oak door and held it aside. A gust of fetid air puffed into Smokey Harper's face. It was laden with mold and dampness.

The cattle boss gave him a shove. "Never could drink the water in that cistern, but I've got a good use for it anyhow. Break out your fins, cowboy—you're on a non-stop swim to hell!"

It was afternoon when Johnny Grimm and Sheriff Hawks stumbled again on Smokey's trail.

They had lost an hour inspecting the shoes of every horse in the livery stable. Then they quartered wide to the south to see whether Bar-Shoe had got away in that direction.

Just after the rain recommenced, they found the bar-shoe leading north again.

"Damn the bugger!" Johnny snarled. "He must've been watching us all the time. This track dates back to the time we rode into town!"

They pressed swiftly along the trail, knowing the impossibility of following after rain pulped the sign. But near the junipers they lost hope completely, as the bottom fell out of the clouds. Every hoof-mark became a miniature sump-hole. Rain danced on the wet ground and sizzled in the trees. They pulled up.

"Just one thing we haven't checked," Johnny muttered. "That gate. Our man might have come back after throwin' us off the trail. Let's have a look. The ground's high and may be draining."

They took just one look around and Hawks let out a shout.

"By heck, here's that bar-shoe again! See how he heads up into the Skull?" Abruptly, he stared at Johnny. "What's the matter with you, kid—?"

Johnny Grimm hung onto the gate. "Sheriff! We—that's Smokey's hoss we've been following!"

CHAPTER V

SIXGUN ADIOS

HAWK'S face went gray, and he listened to the dry run of Johnny's words. "I put a bar-shoe on Nellie Bly after she got cut on a bottle last week. Smokey must have taken her. I'd know that shoe in the dark—"

Gawk's gun flashed blue. "This adds up to trouble. Show me an eavesdropper on Rancho Adios and I'll show you a gent petitionin' for burial."

He blew the lock in fragments and they raced through. The wet plopping of the horses hoofs was drowned in the storm sounds. From a hill-top, minutes later, they saw the squat whiteness of the big adobe. Down the slope they spurred and pulled into the ranch yard.

Hawks snapped a command out of the side of his mouth: "Act like you own the place. We'll walk right in. Only way we'll ever see the inside of the house."

But no one loomed to challenge them. The mess-house rang with mealtime clamor. In the dusky interior of the main building they fell into stiff attitudes of attention. But only the shrill sound of a criado's laughter came to them. They moved into the dining room. It was then that an unholy screech shot through the room like a far-off squeal of rusty hinges. "I can't

swim!" someone bawled. "Gimme—rope!"

Hassett's laugh floated up the stone passage. "Throw him one, One-Eye—round his skinny neck!"

Johnny Grimm lunged through the door and skidded down the steps. One swift glance he took before his guns began to spit. To the left were great racks of wine bottles and brandy kegs, set back in an alcove. To the right yawned a black hole half filled with stagnant water. On the slippery bank, around a lantern, were five men.

Foss Hassett's gun crashed. Johnny felt the hot lash of a slug against his ear. He threw himself to the left, just as Hawks began to fire. Hank Moreland reeled backwards into the wall and slewed down. Someone kicked the lamp into the water.

Johnny's first move, in the thick darkness, was to unfasten his gun-belt and trousers' belt and link them together. He could hear old Smokey yowling and thrashing not far from the slippery bank. He whipped the belts out. There was a tug at the improvised lifeline. Johnny hauled in, and Smokey stopped his noise.

For a moment after he crawled out, he lay there blowing wheezily. The feel of a gun being thrust into his hand revived him. A surge of anger brought a grunt from his lips. Struggling to hands and knees, he shook his head violently. One thought blazed like smoking pitch in his brain . . . to get Hassett.

He began a slow crawl. A slug whizzed up from where a gunman lay on his belly. The shot was close to Smokey. His eyes blazed like heated steel balls. Through the uncomfortable silence, broke the sound of a man breathing. Smokey Harper doubled and sprang.

Jake Learch screamed in terror as a wet shape smashed into his side. Reeling backwards, he screeched the louder as his foot failed to find a solid floor. Water splashed mightily. Immediately Smokey ducked off on another tangent as Colts ripped redly at the spot where he had been.

The skull men knew something was wrong, but they dared not shoot now for fear of gunning down each other. In the midst of them was a snarling, triggering, kicking hunk of hair and gristle that One-Eye Haley had somehow got hold of.

The blacksmith's mistake was in grabbing him. A gun probed his belly. Powder roared and flame mushroomed around the spot where Smokey's slug entered his body. Stiff as a plank, One-Eye dived backwards into the water.

But as he went over, his fingers closed about the barrel of Smokey's Colt. The smooth ivory butt left his grasp. Metal clanged on the stone floor, skittering into the cistern.

Arch Sykes bawled: "Grab him, boss! He's lost his cutter!"

Johnny Grimm heard that cry and it froze him to the marrow. Then a wild idea took hold of him. He wheeled, fumbled his way to Hassett's wine closet. He located a small brandy keg and returned to heave it.

There was a crash of splintered wood. Then the gurgle of liquid bubbling over the floor. Johnny scratched a match and flung it into the puddle. Flames licked into life as the alcohol caught fire.

The blue flames showed Smokey trying to crawl on hands and knees past Hassett and Sykes. Startled faces flashed towards the source of light. Jake Learch kept hollering and pleading for help. He had gone down twice and the slimy, stagnant water was once more sucking him under.

Then gun-thunder ripped the hush to shreds. Foss Hassett got off one shot before his mouth disappeared in a tor-

rent of crimson. Arch Sykes, last of the Skull gun-crowd, kept his gun coughing until Hawks' lead put a finger on his heart.

In the cistern bubbles broke noisily on the surface. . . .

It took the fresh, clean air of the ranchyard to stop Smokey Harper's shaking. There was nothing contrite in his attitude.

"Took you wallopers a heluva time to track a hot trail," he grunted. "I might have drowned, for all o' you."

"You can still drown, for all o' me," Johnny Grimm flared. "All I came here for was to find my Nellie Bly mare that some horse-thief stole."

Smokey swung to the saddle. "Seen my mistake just after I left," he said coldly. "But I was too close to Hassett to turn back." Silent for a moment, he grunted stiffly. "Thought I might take that ramrod's job again, long as I'm goin' back with the hoss anyway."

"Knowin' how prideful you are, Smokey, I can't ask you to do that," Johnny said soberly. "But I'll tell you what. While you're there, there's a paper I want you to sign. It makes you joint owner of the G-Down with me. I reckon you've got no objections to comin' back as co-boss?"

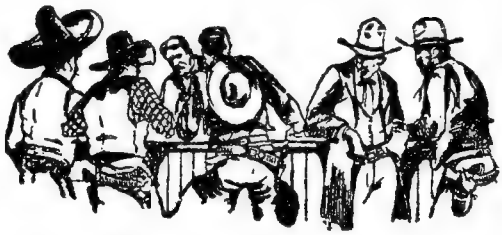
Smokey swallowed noisily and his eyes glistened.

"None at all, Johnny," he said. "None at all!"

INJUN TROUBLE

By MILES OVERHOLT

Breaking the law was Snake Pete's business—even if that meant being a killer!



SHERIFF Jeff James held up an authoritative hand and "Hap" Hazard and "Shady" Lane dragged their mounts to a sliding halt.

"My gosh, the Law's done got us right back of the ears!" Hap said, grinning at the lawman.

"The limb, itself," chirruped Shady. "Kinda withered and covered with moss, but still a limb of the law."

"Will you dumb coyotes gimme time to orate a particle of language?" James growled. "I haven't time to fool with you."

"Kinda behind on yore checker-playin'?" Hap wondered solicitously.

"Shucks, old Jeff's got a lot of silent drinkin' to take care of," Shady explained.

"This concerns yore boss and is danged important, boys," James said, and the two punchers snapped to attention.

"Shoot both barrels," Hap said, blinking.

"It's about Snake Pete, the Piute Indian. You know, mebbe, that when Judge Pingree sentenced Pete to the pen for three years the damn Injun swore to get even with yore boss. Said he'd come back and kill him. 'Member?"

"The boss didn't take his threat none serious," Shady said.

"He better," the sheriff insisted. "That Pete is a revengeful Piute. He'll spend his life getting what he calls even with the Judge. He gets out tomorrow. The Judge'd be sore if he knew I was interestin' myself in his affairs, but me, I know that Injun. We got to watch for him."

Both cowboys were now thoroughly serious. An unusual situation.

"What ought we do?" Hap wondered.

"Lay for Pete. Keep him away from yore boss. Chances are the dang Injun will hang around the LP spread, not knowin' yore boss has moved into town. But you can't tell—there's a lot of Piutes roamin' the hills and they might know the Judge is living alone here."

"But, shucks, we can't just shoot him, can we? Or *can* we?" Shady asked hopefully.

"Come in and get deputized, then use yore own judgment," Sheriff James answered.

An hour or so later the two waddies rode out of town toward the LP, owned by Judge Pingree, who had been both an employer and a father to the two cowhands.

The Piute, Snake Pete, had stabbed a horsetrader three years before and when Judge Pingree sentenced him to three years in state's prison, he swore to "get even" in no uncertain terms. But the jurist was accustomed to such threats, for none ever developed into anything dangerous after the prisoners had had time to cool off.

But the fact that Sheriff James was worried put the boys up on their toes. They swore to keep the knowledge to themselves, but were determined to

ward the renegade away from their boss at any cost. James asked them to keep the matter a secret lest the Judge hear of it and order the guardsmen back to the hills.

There were, as the lawman had stated, a great number of Piutes roaming the countryside, having no particular headquarters. The Piutes never were populous enough to rate a reservation. Some of them worked on the hay farms, some traded horses and others just loafed. But all would doubtless befriend and even help Snake Pete, a sort of tribe leader, to gain his revenge.

HAP and Shady didn't know any of the Indians. All Injuns looked alike to them. But they figured to be suspicious of any and all of them just to play safe.

It was two days later while the boys were hazing some calves out of Cottonwood Canyon that they saw an Indian stealing through the shrubbery on foot toward the LP ranch house.

"The son-of-a-gun! Snake Pete sneakin' up on the house!" ejaculated Shady Lane, taking down his rope.

"I'll head him and you ketch him when I turn him," Hap said, spurring down the slope.

The Indian heard the cowhand's horse crashing through the brush, looked up and turned. But Shady was thundering toward him, so he swerved at an angle and slithered into the heavy thicket.

It did no good, that maneuver, for Hap had sent his pony crashing into the shrubbery at the Indian's heels, made a quick overhand throw, and the rope settled about the Redman's neck.

The Indian grunted and Hap's pony slid to a stop. The Indian knew better than to struggle. Shady rode up and roundly cursed the Piute.

"You danged ornery knifer," he said. "Tryin' to sneak up and whittle our boss down to Injun size, huh? What we ought to do would be to hang you right damn here, only we're fresh outa trees."

"Ugh!" the Indian said, frightened.

"Mebbe skelping him would kinda tend to show him the arrow of his ways," Hap suggested.

"Naw. He's used to that, I betcha. I wouldn't wonder if that's his third or fourth skelp. Injuns grow new ones fast. Nope; we better in—in-car-cer—jail him somewheres and go ask Jeff what now," Shady argued.

They led the protesting Indian behind them over to Charley Jones' little spread nearby and got permission from Charley to lock their prisoner in the toolshed for the night. Charley wanted to know all about it, so they told him the story, admonishing the cowman to keep it a secret and to feed the Injun.

Then the two cowboys rode into Knob to see Sheriff James. But James was out of town, and the boys took on a few snifters, and became loquacious. By midnight a dozen or more cowmen knew that the two boys were protecting Judge Pingree from a murderous Indian, and each promised never to tell a soul.

Dug Turner, the foreman, had to be taken into their confidence the following morning. It was the only way in which they could explain their absence from the supper table the night before, and the fact that they had not brought in the calves they were supposed to be hunting.

Dug was all for the boss' protection and let Hap and Shady work it out as best they could. So shortly after breakfast they rode over to Charley Jones' to have a talk with Snake Pete.

And there they heard a mournful tale. Charley told them that the prisoner had dug his way out of the toolshed and was no longer with them, and offered to help hunt the renegade, which offer was gladly accepted. The situa-

tion was growing dangerous. With the wily Snake Pete again at large the boys feared that he might steal upon Judge Pingree and at least scalp him.

But they didn't find Snake Pete. However, Alf Keller came riding into the LP late that evening and informed the cowhands that he had caught the Indian and that everything was again under control. He said he had tied Snake Pete up in the blacksmith shop and that they could come and get him in the morning. So the boys felt better.

They started forth bright and early to claim the Indian and take him into Knob where Sheriff James could watch him, but on the way over to Keller's Slash K, they were startled to see an Indian dashing down a coulee ahead of them, and were sure at once that Snake Pete had again made his escape.

The Indian had a pony staked out at the mouth of the gulley, and he leaped to its back and began vigorously to quirt it out of the scenery, but Hap's horse was big and fresh and a runnin' fool, and the cowhand soon overtook the Indian, dabbed his twine onto him and jerked him sizzling to the ground, and mingled him with several sharp cornered stones of no mean responsibility. Hap grated harshly and on two teeth:

"Now you danged slip-up eel, I betcha we tie you up so solid this time you won't be able to get yoreself loose with a cross-cut saw."

The Indian said, "No savvy."

But Shady rode up then and they lashed the Injun onto his spotted pony and headed toward town.

THEY couldn't find the lawman, so they tethered the Indian's pony to the hitchrack back of the jail and rode down to the Longhorn to take on a little liquid nourishment. James found them there and, after imbiding a few drinks as a protection against the cold he expected he'd get if he wasn't very, very careful, the sheriff and his cow-boy deputies trooped up to the jail to take over Snake Pete as an institution.

The only reason they didn't slap a cell around the Indian's quivering form was because somebody had cut the ropes and turned the Injun and his broomtail loose, and so Snake Pete was not to be found.

"I better detail a deputy to keep watch over the Judge's house here in town," the lawman said then. "And you fellers better spend the rest of the night hunting Pete. That Injun's bound to massacre the Judge, no foolin'."

So, disconsolately, Hap and Shady started back toward the ranch, having got hold of the idea that Pete would first try to find Judge Pingree there, because the jurist was residing at the ranch when he pronounced sentence upon the renegade.

A mile or so out of Knob they met Bill Slaughter, who stopped and took a much-needed drink out of their bottle.

"I was just lookin' for you gents," Bill said, taking a second helping of the dark meat. "I just ketched yore Injun murderer."

"Yeh? Where at?" they wondered in a breath.

"Right near my place. Sneakin' around the lower pasture, he was. I snagged him and drug him up to the barn and stashed him in the oatbin. He'll stay there because I locked him in with a padlock and throwed the key away."

"Huh? How we goin' to get him out then?" Hap wondered.

"Gosh! I never thought of that!" Bill said, taking another snifter.

Well, the boys felt better to know that Snake Pete was safe, so they rode back into town with Slaughter to replenish the bottle which Bill had pretty nearly made vacant, and while they were still at the Longhorn, Chet Shafer

rode in all out of breath and smoking tobacco.

"I just ketched yore murderin' Injun, Snake Pete," he told Hap and Shady between gulps.

"Huh! Did he get away ag'in?" gasped Shady. Chet nodded.

"If'n he was locked up somewheres, he did," Chet said. "He was skyhootin' down that ridge back of Silver Canyon when I saw him, so I slipped m'string over his dang ornery neck and jerked him over to that deserted cabin in the canyon, and nailed the door shut from the outside.

"You reckon he'll stay there?" Bill Slaughter asked, owlishly.

"It'd take a stick of dynamite to get him out," Chet said. "Fact is, I done got the dynamite ready. 'Course you won't have any Injun left—but he'll be got out."

"That's all that matters," Hap said soberly.

Hap and Shady and Bill and Chet rode out toward their respective ranches at daylight, singling lustily:

"Old John Brown, he had a Little Injun."

At the trail forks Bill and Chet turned off and Hap and Shady headed for the deserted cabin over in Silver Canyon.

But they discovered long before they reached their destination that there wouldn't be a speck of sense riding away over there because right spang in front of them was their breaking-out-of-places Indian. He had got hold of a horse somewhere—probably Chet had left it at the cabin—and was heading toward Knob.

Hap and Shady rubbed the nightmarish sight out of their eyes, took down their hemp and, with a wild yell in spades, started in pursuit of the fleeing Injun. Both tossed their ropes at once and both strings landed about the shoulders of the scared-to-death-Indian. The only flaw in the proceedings was the fact that they were going in different directions, and the Indian couldn't make up his mind fast enough about which way he desired to circulate.

IT WAS pretty nearly an impasse, and by the time the cowboys got the matter in hand, the Indian was almost a wreck. Hap got off and looked him over.

"None of his parts seem to be missing, but he's non composed mentally," he said. "You reckon we made a *good* Injun outa him?"

But Shady said no, you couldn't kill an Indian thataway. You had to cut off his head and wait till sundown before he'd die—and, look, he still was wearing his head!

So they lashed him onto his pony and started for the ranch. This time they'd bet they'd keep him under guard and he wouldn't do any more houdinis.

The Indian was still unconscious when they placed him in the windmill house which was made of cement, and they put two padlocks on the door, and set Ogly Ogum, the halfwit, watching the prison with a double-barreled shotgun, a butcher knife and a six-shooter that wouldn't shoot.

Then they grabbed off a hunk of much-needed slumber, and at midafternoon decided to take the Indian into town. They went out to find Ogly, but the guard was A.W.O.L. and it was too hot and their heads ached too much for them to hunt him. So they went back to the bunkhouse to snag a mite of rest before starting to Knob.

Dug Turner woke them up at sundown, and they explained about the arduous toil they had been undertaking, and Dug said he'd always found ketching Injuns was arduous, especially if you had to do a lot of drinking at the same time.

And after supper just as they were

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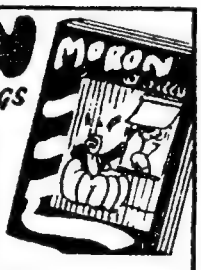

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about to make up their minds to find Ogly who had the keys to the windmill house, why, Bill Slaughter came tearing up to announce that he had got their Indian back for them.

"Seems he musta got loose from Chet, and one of my boys grabbed him down by that old stone corral," Bill said. "Anyways, I found him there awhile ago, all snug and serene, but breathing kinda heavy owing to a scarcity of air and other sustenances."

"How you know they ketched him down by the stone corral?" Hap wondered, thoughtfully scratching his head.

"I only guessed it because that's where the boys was workin'," Bill replied. "He'll be safe till tomorrow, though. We chucked him in the oatbin and I ordered Lafe McGee to sit on the lid all night, and Lafe weighs three hunnert an' ten pounds.

Well, the boys said they'd let it go at that, and wondered how Snake Pete got out of the windmill house, but they'd bet that dang halfwit done it just to show his authority, or something.

Hap and Shady were now wide awake, and here it was bedtime!

"What we oughta do," they told Dug Turner, "would be to ride into Knob and get hold of Sheriff James and have him take over Snake Pete from Bill Slaughter's oatbin and keep him in jail till he promises to lay off'n our boss."

"Yeh," agreed Dug. "I'd like to get a litle work out of you two Injun-eers. Yeh; get rid of that Injun and let's start mingling among the lowly kine for a change."

So Hap and Shady saddled some mounts and rode with Bill Slaughter into town. They found Sheriff James in his office, and he was glad to see them, he said.

"Say, you know what," he began excitedly. "The Piutes are getting all wrought up about you fellers. Old Chief Eaglefeather and a mob of bucks and

greasy squaws are camped down by the slaughterhouse, because—mmm!—they like the smell, and they are saying the whole dang country of whites has rose ag'in 'em."

"Shore, we're ag'in 'em," Slaughter said. "They been harborin' Snake Pete, ain't they? Tying him loose everytime he gits ketched, and all."

"Bill's got Snake Pete penned up in his oatbin with Lafe McGee sitting on him," Shady said then. "We figgered mebbe you'd want to snaggle him in here and hold him for future references."

"We'll go get him in the morning," Jeff said. "Mebbe now we oughta go down to the Longhorn and kinda ponder the situation for a brief period of time."

"You done ripped the words right off'n the end of my tongue," Bill Slaughter said, and so they went and pondered six or seven drinks apiece.

IT WAS Charley Jones who informed them sometime during the night that Lafe McGee musta gone to sleep and rolled off'n the Slaughter oatbin, because he had just ketched Snake Pete ag'in.

"Yes, sir, an' I done sloughed him in the toolshed ag'in," Charley said, "only I put the padlock on *him* this time, instead of the door. Chained him to a manzanita post. He'll be there till the cows come home."

"That'll be quite a spell," Shady murmured, thinking of the cows he and Hap had not brought in.

Bill Slaughter couldn't figger how Lafe McGee had rolled off'n the bin, but a sleepy gent like Lafe could do it. Sheriff James said he'd ride out with the boys in the morning early and bring Snake Pete in from Charley Jones' place, the dang slippery judge persecutor.

But when morning came all to soon

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because they had started a poker game and Shady and Hap were winning, why, a messenger came in for Sheriff James to ride over to the railhead where a robbery had been committed, and the lawman said:

"You two fellers shag that no-good Injun into town. Here's a key to cell 4. Wrop it around his dang neck and hang the key in the cabinet. I'm getting sick an' tired of that Piute.

Then he headed for El Segundo and the railroad, and Hap and Shady started for Charley Jones' ranch alone because Charley was eight dollars ahead in the extended poker game and wanted to run it up to a million while he was at it.

Bill Slaughter was loser and wanted to get even, so he said he'd see the two cowhands in the funny papers.

Hap and Shady sang themselves hoarse before they reached Charley Jones' spread, and the first thing they knew they found themselves in Silver Canyon. So they rode over to the deserted cabin to see how Snake Pete busted out.

The door was nailed tightly shut and there were no indications that Snake Pete had dug himself out. Then they broke in the door and grabbed a look. There was a movement inside the darkened cabin, and then they saw the Indian.

"Hi, Pete," Shady called. "Now how the heck did you get back in here after busting out so dang surreptitious?"

"Water!" croaked the parched injun.

Hap went down to the creek and brought some water in his hat, and the bogged-down prisoner then asked for some food, having practically emptied Hap's four-gallon hat full of water.

"Hey, you think we're a traveling restaurant, or something?" Hap said. "Come on; we'll feed you in town."

The Indian appeared to be too weak to travel on his own power, and Hap had to ride over to Charley Jones' place for a horse. Shady stayed to guard the prisoner and said he'd wait patiently.

When Hap rode into the Jones ranchyard, he heard a lot of unnecessary noise in the toolshed.

"Shucks, tools don't make that kinda racket," he said to himself, so he dismounted and sneaked up to the little window and peered inside.

Well, sir, there was Snake Pete ironed snugly to a post and squalling to get out!

Hap rubbed his eyes, shook his head, rubbed his eyes again.

"It's that dang licker Sime Huggins sells," he muttered to himself. "Everywhere I go now I see me an Injun. I betcha Shady and I just *thought* we saw Pete in that deserted cabin, and when I take this Injun back there, Shady will be sober enough to wonder what became of the noble Redman he was guarding, and me, I will laugh very heartily, indeed."

He roped out a pony and lashed the Indian onto its protesting back and started forth to meet Shady, giggling to himself the while to think what a swell joke he had on his partner in the bovine-hazing-and-Injun-ketching industry.

BUT the trouble was, when he reached the deserted cabin, why, he saw a sight that caused him to curl up inside himself and shudder six buttons off his shirt. For there, besides Shady Lane and the Injun, were Alf Keller and one of his hands and another Indian!

"Heck! It's me that's seeing too many Injun's Hap mourned tearfully. "Not only that but there's some white men throwned in for good measure."

"Hi, Hap!" Alf called. "What's this —a Injun roundup?"

"You wanta brand 'em now or wait till you get the whole herd?" Tiff Mayhew grinned.

(Continued on page 96)

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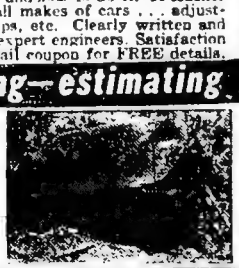

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Hap's head began aching then from red neck to red hair. Shady stirred himself.

'Somehow we went and got ourselves too many Snake Petes," he said sadly. "Now how we going to decide whether we're right or who's wrong?"

"We could mebbe shoot craps to see which one is Snake Pete," Alf Keller suggested, helpfully.

"Nope; that wouldn't save Judge Pingree none," Shady said. "Which one of you dang Injuns is Snake Pete?" he asked then, turning to the weak Indian.

"Ugh! Me Running Fox," the prisoner croaked, like he was Leaping Frog.

"Me John Go-Further," said another.

"No see-um Snake Pete," the third and most talkative one grunted. "Me Beaver Tail."

"I betcha they're all cockeyed liars," Hap finally groaned. "I betcha they're ALL Snake Pete!"

They looked up then as three riders approached. They were Sheriff James, Bill Slaughter and Charley Jones.

"What is this—a pow-wow?" Charley Jones wondered, he having won $26 in the poker game and was very jovial.

"It's a Snake Pete-fest," Shady said. "Only way to play 'er safe, as I see it, is to hang all three of 'em."

"Wait a minute," said Sheriff James. "I got a letter here that might help clear up this here sitcheashun."

He passed the letter over to Shady Lane who read it as soon as he could get the paper into a position where it wasn't leaping all over his hands like a couple of homeless warts.

Hap read it then and grinned ruefully.

"So what does that make us?" he wondered.

"Drunkards," said Shady Lane.

"Suppose we turn these here children of the forest loose and go find the three-four other Snake Petes the cowmen have got jailed up in various and sundry

places, and then go take on a few portions of what it takes to make a sad and gloomy world brighter."

"You practically ripped my vocabulary in two, especially with them last few words," Bill Slaughter said.

They turned the three Indians loose, then rode over to the LP and unlocked the windmill house and let that one go, and also the one locked up under Lafe McGee, who hadn't moved an inch. Then they couldn't think of any more places where an Indian might be confined, and decided they wouldn't think any more about them, anyway. What was a locked-up Indian more or less!

So they returned to Knob and leaned dispassionately against the mahogany, till Dug Turner came to town looking for his two Indian-ketching cowboys.

The waddies said they were full of ready to go back to work, anyway, because ketching Snake Petes was arduous toil and an Indian wasn't worth assault. Then they figgered out where all the captured Injuns had been cached and made sure that all had been freed, after which Dug Turner read the letter which the lawman had received from the warden of the state penitentiary:

"Dear Sheriff James:

"This is to inform you that Snake Pete, the Indian who was sent here from your district on an assault-with-a-deadly-weapon charge, was killed three weeks ago while trying to make his escape with three other prisoners. I thought the information might be of value to you in case you planned to keep a watch on him.

Very truly yours,
H. E. Stanholt, Warden."

"And what does that make us?" Hap insisted upon knowing.

"Couple of worthless cowhands—and that's all," Dug Turner said. And it wasn't so much what he said that bothered Hap and Shady, it was the way he wrapped it up!

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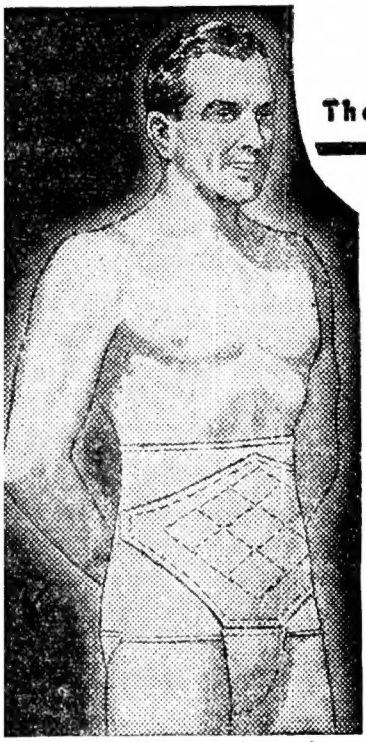

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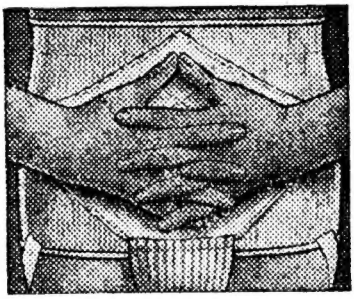

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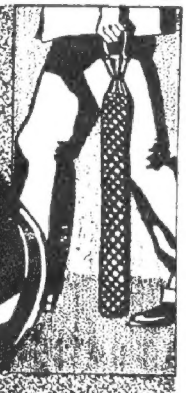

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